The New Criterion

March 1996

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *March 1996*

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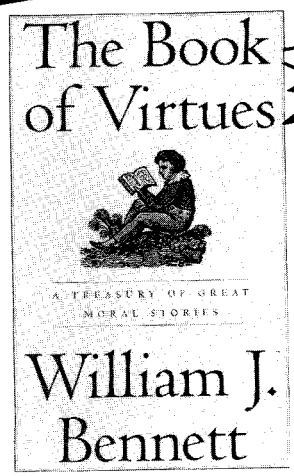

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Notes & Comments: March 1996

Steinerisms revisited

Good news! Readers who missed *The Paris Review*'s special humor issue this past fall (reviewed here last month by Mark Steyn) now have another chance to savor the wit of this venerable quarterly. There are some who believe that the most poignant moment in the *PR*'s humor issue came with the question mark affixed to its subtitle: "Whither Mirth?" Wither, indeed. But in case anyone should go away thinking that *The Paris Review* lacks a sense of humor, the editors cleverly saved their funniest piece for the current, Winter 1995, issue. We refer to the long interview with the polymathic, transcontinental George Steiner, author of (among many other books) *After Babel*, one work of literary criticism whose contents really do live up to its title.

The spur for this interview was Mr. Steiner's appointment as the first Lord Weidenfeld Professor of Comparative Literature at Oxford—a position, Mr. Steiner reveals, "which I'm told was set up in the hope that I would come to start it." Naturally. And it must be said that the interviewer, Ronald A. Sharp, is the perfect straight man for the task of interviewing George Steiner.

> INTERVIEWER: Your memory is virtually photographic?
>
> STEINER: It's highly trained. We started as five and six year-olds in the French lycée . . . I still know much of my Racine by heart. . . . I have an impression of a music of thought so much beyond my own grasp. In German . . . a poem, in Italian . . . Dante. He accompanies me constantly, constantly.

That second "constantly" is masterly. After Mr. Steiner explains that he scooped up his B.A. at the University of Chicago in a single year, he lets drop that, while he was struggling to decide between doing graduate work with Allen Tate in literature or with Richard McKeon in philosophy—both giants in their disciplines—"Harvard contacted me about a graduate place." Quick as a lap dog, Mr. Sharp pipes up: "Harvard contacted you? They already knew about you?" *Mais oui!* "Someone," Steiner replies with practiced self-deprecation, "told them I was a student worth having."

The quintessential Steiner touch, however, is still to come: for not only did Harvard contact him—"someone" having disclosed what a prize he was—but no sooner had he gone to Harvard than he realized he had made a terrible mistake: "the icy academic atmosphere" in Cambridge, Massachusetts, was not for him at all. Fortunately, he had the "chutzpah" to apply for a Rhodes Scholarship. And although his rival was a double-varsity West Point man with a gold star on his collar—well, George pulled off the Rhodes by wowing the interviewers

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with his "long answer" (who could doubt it?) about his views on the Hiss case: "I was passionately convinced that *she* was the guilty party and that he was exercising his paradoxical right of perjury to shield her." A consummate Steinerism, that: not just a "right of perjury," which is simple nonsense, but a *paradoxical* right of perjury, whereby we are translated from the merely nonsensical to that viscous, Steinerite realm wherein opposites not only meet but fall in love.

George Steiner has always had an uncanny ability to combine arrogance with false humility, and he really outdoes himself in this interview. Asked about the poetry he used to write, Mr. Steiner explains:

> My French lycée education, which in some respects still resembled that of the nineteenth century, involved the constant learning by heart, the constant grammatical construal of Latin, then of Greek. This was all based on the assumption that a literate man—perhaps I should add *woman* but that would be cant: it was essentially masculine—can write verse. We were asked to imitate a famous Latin passage, finding our own Latin; then French. . . . Nobody expected you to have any spontaneous genius, but a craft, a *techne*, the Greek word which gives us our "technology" and "technique" [thanks for that, George] . . .
>
> So I was trained in that way and when I fully entered the English-language world I wrote poems, some of which were perhaps a tiny shade better than that. A few may have had a spark of private intensity and need, but on the whole they were verse, and the distance between verse and poetry is light years.

Only "verse," you see; but in the next paragraph he informs us that "Dryden and Pope work from prose into verse: some of their best verse is a heightened kind of prose." The insinuation, so lightly introduced, is that Dryden and Pope—just like George Steiner!—managed only "verse."

No doubt about it: connoisseurs of the Steineresque will find some vintage gems in this interview. Non sequiturs dressed up as deep proverbs? Plenty: "But to me trees have roots, and humans have legs, which is an immense advance." Twisted similes? You bet: "Students can see through hypocrisy as through a glass not darkly." And, of course, he alternately mentions Nazism and torture or God and transcendence every few pages to demonstrate that his social conscience is almost as active as his over-developed spiritual consciousness. Not that Mr. Steiner is your ordinary wimpish egghead, for it transpires, too, that he was an avid and accomplished soccer player as a youth.

> INTERVIEWER: I never knew you were a soccer player . . .
>
> STEINER: Of course I was a soccer player, I was French. The lycée was a seminal experience for me. Vichy was running it, and some teachers were refugees of genius. . . . So I had encounters with the princes of European refugee culture, and that's where I discovered my vocation.

Clearly, the lycée has a lot to answer for. But who is not grateful for the phrase "refugees of genius"?

Yes, we must be grateful for George Steiner. He is a Mr. Casaubon for our time. Like George Eliot's repellent character in *Middlemarch*, he is a walking admonition about the liabilities of a certain kind of smarmy pedantry. Although he does a remarkable impersonation of a serious intellectual, he is nonetheless a compendium of false notes and pretentious affectations. In this sense he functions as a kind of salutary warning, more or less like a fog horn. What makes him damaging as well as irritating is the way in which he can make even the most important ideas and authors seem somehow moist and tawdry. It takes a lot to put one off, say, Shakespeare, but for George Steiner it is the work of a moment. After he gets through with a writer or an idea, one wants to open the windows so that things can dry out. And unlike Mr. Casaubon, who never published anything, Mr. Steiner is depressingly prolific. So it is that we caught our breath

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when he spoke in this interview of his "dream" of a moratorium on discussing his favored topics—can there be poetry after Auschwitz? etc.—for "ten years, fifteen, a hundred years." Could it be? Alas, no, it was only a dream. George Steiner will drizzle on.

Marketing multiculturalism

What happens when the marketing managers of academic publishing meet up with the partisans of radical multiculturalism? One result is the new *Princeton Handbook of Multicultural Poetries*, surely among the most cynically spurious volumes to have rolled off a university press in recent years. Edited by T. V. F. Brogan, a co-editor of the latest edition of *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, the *Handbook* is a compilation of articles from that venerable reference work, repackaged to appeal to the multi-culti, politically correct market. What seems to have happened is this: noticing that the *Encyclopedia* was selling rather well, someone had the inspired idea of peddling the same thing twice—simply dress it up in native garb, plaster the word "multicultural" on the cover, and presto! another $45 per volume ($17.95 in paper). Mr. Brogan says the editors of the *Encyclopedia* discerned a "need" for "smaller and more focused child-volumes on specific subject areas." What need? The *Princeton Handbook* is simply a reprinting—"without redaction," as Mr. Brogan slyly puts it—of the articles on national poetries from the *Princeton Encyclopedia*.

Except, that is, for Mr. Brogan's own contribution to the *Handbook*. Our edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia* was published before Mr. Brogan became involved. It begins with a straightforward preface, cast in staid, scholarly tones, which outlines the scope of the book. Drawing on the title of a novel by C. S. Lewis, Mr. Brogan introduces his *Handbook* not with a preface but a "Pre (*Till We Have Faces*) Face: Culture, Poetry, the Other, 'Sexy Ideas,' 'Clerical Work,' and Genuine Savagery." One can just imagine poor C. S. Lewis, that most fastidious of writers, turning in his grave. Mr. Brogan castigates "the narrow and conformist ways that the academy construes thought." But his preface—if we may call it that—is a veritable repository of contemporary academic poetry-speak, full of the cutesy, pseudo-breathless rhetoric of a pedagogue desperate to appeal to the adolescents whose sensibility he never outgrew.

Accordingly, Mr. Brogan comes through with the requisite quota of political grandstanding. He even manages the mandatory knock against Ronald Reagan (in a reference book about poetry!) and fulminates against American businesses for "proving Marx right after all about capitalism (though wrong about communism)." Replete with an illustration of a broken chain on its cover (signifying liberation, you see), the *Handbook* pretends to be an exciting new aid to existential awakening: "This is, most immediately, a book about poetry and culture(s). On a deeper level it is about life, about the meaningful rendering of life into few and memorable words that drench and abide, and—not least—about the experience of the Other." In fact, though, this book is simply a series of encyclopedia articles. Here, to take an example at random, is the beginning of the entry on Byelorussian poetry, which "expresses the spiritual richness and resilience of a small East Slav country set between Poland and Russia, formerly the westernmost republic of the U.S.S.R. The earliest examples of verse in B. belong to Frańcisk Skaryna, . . . the Bible translator, publisher, and engraver, but he had no successors as a poet," etc. All true, no doubt, and eminently informative. But it is pretty far from Mr. Brogan's state of emergency. Some books come with epigraphs; in a more appropriate gesture, Mr. Brogan has furnished the *Princeton Handbook* with an "epitaph," which our dictionary defines as "an inscription on a tombstone in memory of the one buried there."

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"Abstraction" at the Guggenheim

by Hilton Kramer

Nothing is more remarkable about the art of the last quarter-century than the diminished role played by abstraction in defining the course of contemporary artistic thought. Where abstraction had not so long before been the mark of an "advanced" aesthetic sensibility, it was now increasingly said by critics, curators, and artists of many different persuasions to represent a conservative or academic or even reactionary attitude toward art and culture. Abstraction, which for decades had loomed as a vehicle of aesthetic emancipation, was now declared to be too idealistic, too formalistic, too metaphysical, too elitist, or too political—or else, in some cases, not political enough—to be accorded the high place that had formerly been ceded to it in the hierarchy of cultural achievements. Where in the past it had been denounced by reactionary politicians as part of the Bolshevik menace, abstraction was now dismissed by left-wing academics and their allies in the museums as an instrument of the Cold War against Communism.

At times, indeed, it has been difficult to know the exact nature of the case against abstraction. The charges emanated from so many diverse quarters and served such a wide variety of artistic and ideological interests. Did abstraction's alleged delinquencies derive, as some now claimed, from an excessive reliance on the Idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant—which in art circles was usually a code term for the critical views of the late Clement Greenberg—or from an unconscionable complicity in the Cold War ideology of Nelson Rockefeller and John Foster Dulles? Through the 1970s and 1980s and into the 1990s, the content of the indictment has undergone many changes—the only constant seems to be an unremitting hostility to the criticism of Clement Greenberg—but the campaign to discredit abstraction has continued to spread and garner support. It reflects one of the most stunning reversals of professional opinion in the art world since the so-called "triumph" of the New York School in the 1950s routed the philistine styles of the Depression era in the institutions that preside over the public life of contemporary art.

It is not the least of the disappointments caused by the exhibition called "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century," which Mark Rosenthal has organized this season at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, that it fails so utterly to respond to this campaign of disparagement with a rousing and reliable account of the achievements of the subject.[1] Neither as a coherent survey of the

1 "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline" opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, on February 9, 1996, and remains on view through May 12. A catalogue of the exhibition, written by Mark Rosenthal has been published by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams (310 pages, $75; $42.95 paper).

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history of abstract art nor as a report on the current artistic outlook of abstraction can this exhibition be said to meet the needs of such a show in the last decade of the century that, in its opening years, saw the birth of the aesthetic aspiration it purports to document. As for the book-length catalogue that Mr. Rosenthal has written to accompany the exhibition, it is less a spirited defense of abstraction's classic accomplishments than it is an academic reprise of the received ideas that have shaped the conventional view of abstract art for as long as anyone can now remember. Not only does it fail to take a fresh look at the place which abstraction occupies in the history of modern culture, but in its concluding pages Mr. Rosenthal's text all but surrenders to the enemies of abstract art in a feckless attempt to appease and accommodate their assault upon it.

Thus, on the last page of his catalogue text Mr. Rosenthal can find nothing better to say on behalf of abstraction than that its fate will now be determined by the contemporary culture wars that consign the whole realm of high art to historical oblivion:

> Abstraction is in the category of "high art," which claims a privileged position in society. Since all similar "high" manifestations have lately been discredited, or simply overwhelmed by popular culture, abstraction can hardly expect a different fate.

As a consequence, he worries that "the appearance now of a publication devoted to abstraction might therefore be regarded as an act of nostalgia"—which is hardly a ringing endorsement of abstraction's achievements. Neither is his observation that "in the current art climate, abstraction might find a public that is relieved to escape art concerned with social and political issues," for to condemn abstract art to a merely escapist role in cultural life is tantamount to declaring its cultural irrelevance. What all this mealy-mouthed equivocation adds up to is an admission on Mr. Rosenthal's part that his principal concern is not to be seen as a supporter of an artistic enterprise that may now be stigmatized as elitist, politically incorrect, or otherwise opposed to the current ethos of the academy and the art world.

This is hardly a position from which a confident and comprehensive account of abstraction's achievements could be expected to be mounted, and "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century" is not, in fact, an exhibition that even begins to do justice to those achievements. The only barely adequate section of the show is the one that focuses on the three pioneer talents of abstraction—Vasily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich—yet even that section would have set the exhibition on a firmer foundation had the work of Kandinsky and Mondrian been given an even stronger representation. They were, after all, the artists who chartered the course from which many later abstractionists set off on their own. It is in the woeful underrepresentation of Kandinsky's and Malevich's contemporaries in the Russian avant-garde, however, that the "Abstraction" exhibition suffers its first collapse.

Russian abstraction in the years immediately preceding and following the Revolution of 1917 constituted one of the most remarkable periods in the entire history of abstract art. It produced varieties of abstraction—and for the first time, of course—that were not to be seen again on anything like the same scale of ambition until the much later work of Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Carl Andre, and certain other American abstractionists of the Minimalist and Color-field schools. (The fact that Louis and Noland are not even included in the exhibition is less a judgment of their work, I think, than a sign that Mr. Rosenthal did not wish to be seen to be influenced in his choices by the views of Clement Greenberg.) The inexplicable failure to accord Russian abstraction a role commensurate with its accomplishments creates, in any case, an aesthetic and historical void in the exhibition that cannot be filled, as Mr.

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Rosenthal has attempted to do, by a single stripe-painting by Olga Rozanova, a single construction by Naum Gabo, and three posthumous replicas of the work of Aleksander Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin.

This crucial omission is also a reminder—and not the only one in the exhibition, either—that Mr. Rosenthal lacks one of the essential gifts needed for the effective presentation of his subject: an eye for the kind of historical rhyming that allows the spectator to see how, over the course of time, the stylistic innovations of one period are related to subsequent artistic developments to form what is, in effect, a distinct aesthetic tradition. In recent decades we have seen some excellent exhibitions of Russian abstraction both here and abroad, but what we have not had is an exhibition in which the Russian avant-garde is seen in the larger context of the entire history of abstraction in this century. This was certainly one of the things to be expected from a show at the Guggenheim Museum calling itself "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century," but no serious attempt has been made to meet that expectation.

Nor is the marginalization of the Russian avant-garde in the exhibition the only example of a major movement central to the history of abstract art being passed over in favor of some highly dubious contemporary reputations. In this survey of abstraction, we are given Mondrian without the De Stijl group and Kandinsky without the Bauhaus. We aren't given Paul Klee at all, or László Moholy-Nagy—which pretty much completes the erasure of the Bauhaus's contribution to abstract art. (The two paintings by Josef Albers date from a much later period.)

The immense influence exerted by Dada and Surrealism on the next major phase of abstraction is also given remarkably short shrift in this exhibition. It is pathetic to see a figure of Jean Arp's importance represented by two works, one of which is an embroidery by his wife, Sophie Taeuber! Kurt Schwitters, too, is kissed off with a single collage-construction, while even the greatest artist to effect an historic synthesis of Surrealism and abstraction—Joan Miró—is, with three paintings from the 1920s and nothing later, made to look like a far less important contributor to the history of abstract art than, say, Yves Klein or Barnett Newman or Richard Long. It is in decisions like these that the "Abstraction" exhibition verges on becoming a travesty. Miró, notwithstanding his own repeated disavowals of abstraction, *is* one of the giant talents of abstract painting—and a pivotal figure, moreover, in the formation of the kind of abstraction that came to dominate a good deal of the New York School. But that is still another of the aesthetic linkages that has been dropped down the historical memory hole in this exhibition.

Then, too, the entire course of American abstract art prior to the emergence of the New York School has been abridged in this show almost to the point of extinction. Marsden Hartley's single painting in the exhibition, *The Aero* (1914), fine as it is, is hardly sufficient to represent the period in which the first generation of American modernists were creating some remarkable examples of early abstraction. Morton Schamberg's construction of plumbing fixtures mounted on a box and mockingly entitled *God* (1917–1918)—to cite but one example—is certainly a more original contribution to abstraction than, say, John Chamberlain's 1962 construction of automobile parts, and one that is directly related to the kind of Dada abstraction that is given so little attention here. But Chamberlain's is now a high-profile reputation and Schamberg's isn't, and high-profile reputations are consistently given priority over artistic accomplishment in Mr. Rosenthal's selections for this show.

A penchant for high-profile reputations has also governed the way the New York School is presented in the "Abstraction" exhibition. Only the art of Jackson Pollock is reasonably well represented in this section of the show. The omissions of Hans Hofmann and Arshile Gorky, among others,

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dash any hope that the newcomer to this important chapter in the history of abstract art will be able to make any historical sense of its emergence fifty years ago. So does the scant attention given to Willem de Kooning's abstract paintings of the late 1940s. Mr. Rosenthal falls into line with the current cant among museum curators that late de Kooning is now the preferred de Kooning—never mind that the late paintings are often a mess—and that the crowning achievement of the New York School is, in any case, to be found in the art of Barnett Newman. Hence one of the largest single installations in the entire exhibition is given over to Newman's oversize and overrated paintings.

The exhibition can scarcely be said to improve, moreover, as it approaches the problem of contemporary abstraction. Are we really expected to believe that Richard Long's souvenirs of his long walking tours of sundry landscape sites are among the best things that contemporary abstract art has to offer? Is it really possible that even Mr. Rosenthal believes that the work he commissioned Frank Stella to create for this exhibition—an incoherent heap of aluminum and stainless steel called *Schools and School Masters* (1996)—is anything but a disaster? Long is included, I suppose, because the alleged ecological message of his art makes some pretense to overcoming contemporary abstraction's reputed lack of involvement in social issues, and Stella is once again allowed to get away with murder—the murder of art, that is—because he is now considered in museum circles to be beyond criticism. After all, hadn't we been told in 1987—on the occasion of his second retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art—that his work called to mind "the lessons of Dante, Shakespeare, and Picasso"? If the work that Long and Stella are producing in the 1990s really does represent the best that contemporary abstraction has to offer, then the future of abstraction is indeed hopeless, and from that perspective it may therefore be more appropriate to regard "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century" as a protracted obituary of its subject rather than an account of its achievements.

It remains to be asked what exactly Mark Rosenthal had in mind in declaring that abstract art "claims" for itself "a privileged position in society." In what sense does a Mondrian or a Kandinsky make a claim of this sort that is radically different from, say, the implicit claims made by a landscape by Monet, a Cubist portrait by Picasso, or a still life by Matisse? The latter, surely, avail themselves of the pictorial strategies of abstraction without plunging irreversibly into the realm of the purely abstract. But then, of course, there are abstract paintings by Mondrian and Kandinsky that avail themselves of the strategies of representation while going well beyond the depiction of recognizable objects. At what point in this dialectical process does abstraction begin to claim a greater privilege for itself? Mr. Rosenthal doesn't say, of course—so we are left to wonder if, buried somewhere at the bottom of this shameless assertion, there lies nothing but some unexamined residue of the old Marxist denunciation of abstract art as "bourgeois formalism."

Some such explanation certainly suggests itself when Mr. Rosenthal goes on, too, about high art having been "lately discredited"—yet another left-wing shibboleth he feels no responsibility to explain. Still it must be asked: if high art—and not only abstract art—has really been discredited, then what function is a curator of high art like Mr. Rosenthal performing in his duties as a guardian of our artistic heritage? I don't think Mr. Rosenthal really believes that high art has been discredited, but the lip-service he pays to this political cant has obviously inhibited his ability to mount the kind of rousing exhibition that abstract art is in urgent need of at the present time. A great opportunity has been forfeited on the altar of received opinion.

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An update on the culture wars

by Roger Kimball

Moral virtue is the quality of acting in the best way in relation to pleasures and pains, and vice is the opposite.
—Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

We have witnessed what amounts to a cultural revolution, comparable to the one in China if not worse, and whereas the Chinese have to some extent overcome their cultural revolution, I see many signs that ours is getting worse all the time. . . . I do not know what the future will bring, and my expectations are rather grim not only for our education and scholarship, but also for our economic, legal, and political future.
—Paul Oskar Kristeller, *"A Life of Learning" (1991)*

A year or two ago, *The New York Times* reported in its science pages on the unhappy fate of one Phineas P. Gage, a foreman for the New England Railroad. In 1848, Gage was helping to lay track across Vermont. His job involved drilling holes in large rocks, into which he would pour blasting powder and lay down a fuse. He would then cover the explosives with sand, tamping it down with a long metal rod. One day, he inadvertently triggered an explosion. The metal rod went hurtling through his skull, entering just under his left eye and landing some yards away. Amazingly, Gage survived the assault. He was stunned but able to walk away. And although he lost an eye, he seemed otherwise to recover. It soon became clear, however, that Gage was a diminished man. His intellectual powers were apparently intact; but what the writer for the *Times* called his "moral center" had been destroyed. Phineas Gage had become a moral cripple, utterly unable to make ethical decisions.

Pondering the state of American cultural life today, I have often had occasion to recall the sad story of Phineas Gage. Like him, our culture seems to have suffered some ghastly accident that has left it afloat but rudderless, its "moral center" a shambles. The cause of this disaster was not an explosion of gunpowder, but the more protracted and spiritually convulsive detonation of what the eminent philosopher Paul Oskar Kristeller has rightly called America's "cultural revolution." As anyone familiar with the culture wars now raging throughout American society knows—and who can have entirely escaped the spectacle?—it is a revolution whose effects are still very much with us. In his reflections on the life of learning, Professor Kristeller was concerned primarily with the degradation of intellectual standards that this cultural revolution brought in its wake. "One sign of our situation," he noted, "is the low level of our public and even of our academic discussion. The frequent disregard for facts or evidence, or rational discourse and arguments, and even of consistency, is appalling." Who can disagree?

As Professor Kristeller suggests, however, the intellectual wreckage visited upon our educational institutions and traditions of

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scholarship is only part of the story. There are also social, political, and moral dimensions to America's cultural revolution—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the spiritual deformations we have witnessed are global, and affect everything.

The movement for sexual "liberation" (not to say outright debauchery) occupies a prominent place in the etiology of this revolution, as does the mainstreaming of the drug culture and its attendant pathologies. Indeed, the two are related. Both are expressions of the narcissistic hedonism that was an important ingredient of the counterculture from its earliest beginnings in the 1950s. The salon Marxist Herbert Marcuse was not joking when, in *Eros and Civilization* (1955)—one of many inspirational tracts for the movement—he extolled the salvific properties of "primary narcissism" as an effective protest against the "repressive order of procreative sexuality." "The images of Orpheus and Narcissus reconcile Eros and Thanatos," Marcuse wrote. "They recall the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated: . . . the redemption of pleasure, the halt of time, the absorption of death; silence, sleep, night, paradise—the Nirvana principle not as death but as life." The succeeding decades showed beyond cavil that the infantilizing pursuit of sexual perversity that Marcuse advocated was really a form of death-in-life, not "liberation." But of course this was something that neither this guru of liberation nor his many followers ever acknowledged or perhaps even recognized.

One of the most conspicuous, and conspicuously jejune, features of the culture wars has been the union of such hedonism with a species of radical (or radical chic) politics. This union fostered a situation in which, as the famous slogan put it, "the personal is the political." The politics in question were seldom more than a congeries of radical clichés, serious only in that they helped to disrupt society and blight a good many lives. In that sense, to be sure, they proved to be very serious indeed. Apocalyptic rhetoric notwithstanding, the behavior of these "revolutionaries" consistently exhibited that most common of bourgeois passions, anti-bourgeois animus—expressed, as always, safely within the swaddling clothes of bourgeois security. As Allan Bloom remarked in *The Closing of the American Mind*, the cultural revolution proved to be so successful on college campuses partly because of "the bourgeois' need to feel that he is not bourgeois, to have dangerous experiments with the unlimited. . . . Anti-bourgeois ire is the opiate of the Last Man." It almost goes without saying that, like all narcotics, the opiate of anti-bourgeois ire was both addictive and debilitating.

The effect of these developments on cultural life has been incalculable. One of the most far-reaching and destructive effects has been the simultaneous glorification and degradation of popular culture. Even as the most ephemeral and intellectually vacuous products of pop culture—rock videos, comic books, television sit-coms—are enlisted as fit subjects for the college curriculum, so, too, has the character of popular culture itself become ever more vulgar, vicious, and degrading. A watershed moment came with the apotheosis of The Beatles in the mid-1960s. The literary critic Richard Poirier wasn't the only academic to make a fool of himself slobbering over the Fab Four; but his observation that "sometimes they are like Monteverdi and sometimes their songs are even better than Schumann's" in the *Partisan Review* in 1967 did establish a standard of fatuity that has rarely been bettered. Unfortunately, the more popular culture has been raised up—the more vigorously it has been championed by the cultural elite—the lower popular culture has sunk. In comparison with the pop music of today, The Beatles almost do seem like Monteverdi. Almost. At the same time, though—and this is one of the most insidious effects of the whole process—the integrity of high culture itself has been severely compromised by the

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mindless elevation of pop culture. The academic enfranchisement of popular culture has meant not only that trash has been mistaken as great art, but also that great art has been treated as if it were trash. When Allen Ginsberg (for example) is taught beside Shakespeare as a "great poet," the very idea of greatness is rendered unintelligible and high art ceases to function as an ideal.

Although their causes are complex, there is one sense, anyway, in which this triumph of vulgarity has helped to pave the way for the success of the twin banes of political correctness and radical multiculturalism. The abandonment of intrinsic standards of achievement is an invitation to filter everything through the reductive sieve of politics and the ideology of victimhood. Thus it is that vanguard opinion champions the idea of "art" as a realm of morally unassailable privilege even as it undermines the realities of artistic achievement: technique, beauty, tradition. Art retains its status as a source of spiritual uplift, however dubious, yet also functions as an exercise of politics by other means. Hence Robert Mapplethorpe's brutal and disgusting photographs of the sado-masochistic underground are beyond criticism because they are "art," while at the same time they are held up as important "challenges" to the repressive, bourgeois regime of "mandatory heterosexuality" and the like.

For anyone interested in seeing how this concoction of forces first coalesced, the Whitney Museum of American Art recently obliged with an exhibition called "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965."[1] Considered as an art exhibition, this mélange of some two hundred objects hardly exists. In more ways than one, walking through the exhibition is like touring a junk shop. Fifth-rate paintings, tenth-rate sculptures and films, innumerable books, photographs, magazines, and other literary detritus, all scattered about the Whitney's exhibition spaces while the drug-inspired jazz of Miles Davis drones on in the background: that is what "Beat Culture and the New America" has to offer. The two or three objects of even minimal aesthetic accomplishment on view—some paintings by Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline—are not products of the Beat sensibility at all but merely happened to be created at the same time that the Beats got going.

Although aesthetically nugatory, "Beat Culture and the New America" is an exhibition of some significance—though not, alas, in quite the way that Lisa Phillips, its curator, intended. Casting a retrospective glance at the sordid world of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and other Beat icons, the exhibition furnishes a kind of pathologist's report on one of the most toxic cultural movements in American history. In this sense, at least, we owe the Whitney a debt of gratitude. The romance that has surrounded the Beat generation since the mid-Sixties has acted as a kind of sentimental glaze, obscuring its fundamentally nihilistic impulse under a heap of bogus rhetoric about liberation, spontaneity, and higher consciousness. The Beats were not cuddly iconoclasts. They were drug-abusing sexual predators and infantile narcissists whose shamelessness helped con a confused and gullible public into believing that their ravings were works of genius. We must thank Lisa Phillips and the Whitney for reminding us of this with such vividness. If nothing else, "Beat Culture and the New America" shows that the Beats were not simply artistic charlatans of prodigious accomplishment: they were—and, in the case of those who are still with us, they

1 "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950–1965" was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from November 9, 1995, through February 4, 1996. It will be seen at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, from June 2 through September 15, 1996, and at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, from October 5 through December 29, 1996. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Lisa Phillips, has been published by the Whitney and Flammarion (279 pages, $55; $35 paper).

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remain—moral simpletons whose destructive influence helped fuel the cultural catastrophe with which we are now living.

Not, of course, that the folks at the Whitney see it quite this way. But then the Whitney is itself a splendid example of cultural breakdown. In his foreword to the catalogue, the Whitney's director David Ross complains that the "depth and seriousness of Beat culture" was insufficiently appreciated by many postwar journalists whose "reactionary" response led them to dismiss the Beats as "loony beret-wearing weirdos, conspiratorial communists, amoral homosexuals, filthy drug-addicted hipsters, or merely pathetic wannabe artists." Well, it is true that many Beats went around without berets or indeed hats of any kind.

One nice thing about Mr. Ross is his predictability. On the subject of Beat culture, one knows in advance that he will deplore McCarthyism and the Fifties generally, and that he will then trot out a number of current clichés about gender-race-class-sexuality, ending with a flourish about the importance of Federal funding for the arts. And right on cue he tells us that the Beats suffered from "politicians looking for convenient scapegoats," that they "opened up a closed-down culture," and that later "artists struggling with their emerging sexual identities found the Beat world a nurturing place, where desire could be freely expressed and pleasure openly extolled." Finally, he registers his relief that he can "still cite the National Endowment for the Arts as a public champion of important exhibitions such as this one."

Miss Phillips sings a similar song, but waxes even more lyrical. In "Beat Culture: America Revisioned," her essay for the catalogue, Miss Phillips speaks of the "enduring achievement" and "now legendary literary accomplishments" of the Beats, whose "vanguard and antimaterialist" stance set them against the "conformity and consensus of official culture" and the "smug optimism of the Eisenhower years." I believe she forgot to mention how that great anti-materialist spirit, Allen Ginsberg, received a million dollars for his papers from Stanford University, but no matter: Miss Phillips is only too aware of how far Beat culture has come. In one remarkable passage, she explains how

> during the Cold War, in the aftermath of World War II, a new generation emerged in America, known as the Beat generation. Disillusioned with the progress of science and Western technocracy, the Beats embarked on a quest for a new set of values out of which to build a new faith, [and] a new tribal ethic was born. Although once rejected by mainstream society as outlaws, rebels, and morally dangerous, today the Beats are recognized as icons of America's counterculture and as one of the most influential cultural movements of the century. Their literary works, which aroused great controversy and academic disdain when first published in the fifties, are now part of the canon of American literature taught in universities around the country. Their archives are selling for vast sums, . . . and first editions of their books are highly sought after. Perhaps most important, the Beats continue to inspire younger generations of artists with their directness, courage, and intensity of vision.

There is a great deal one could say about this remarkable paragraph, beginning with that supposed disillusionment about "the progress of science and Western technocracy"—as if anything like the Beats could exist in a society lacking the fruits of modern science and technology. But there is one frighteningly accurate statement in Miss Phillips's inventory: namely, that the Beats "are now part of the canon of American literature taught in universities around the country." As she later observes, "the Beat rebellion gave form to an invisible turning point in American culture at mid-century." David Ross and Lisa Phillips celebrate this development as a giant step forward for freedom and creativity. In fact, the institutionalization of the Beat ethic has been a moral, aesthetic, and intellectual dis-

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aster of the first order. (It has also been a disaster for fashion and manners, but that is a separate subject.) We owe to the 1960s the ultimate institutionalization of radicalism: of drugs, pseudo-spirituality, promiscuous sex, virulent anti-Americanism, hypocritical anti-capitalism, and the precipitous decline of artistic and intellectual standards. But the 1960s and 1970s only codified and extended into the middle class the radical spirit of the Beats.

Mr. Ross and Miss Phillips purr over the literary achievements of the Beats. What literary achievement? Jack Kerouac, who has the dubious distinction of popularizing the phrase "the Beat Generation" in his novel *On the Road*, is nearly always cited as one of the chief artistic (as well as existential) inspirations for the Beats. Allen Ginsberg, in particular, has again and again paid homage to this master, singling out in particular Kerouac's "essay" entitled "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" as a fount of wisdom. Here is a representative passage from that effusion: "LAG IN PROCEDURE: No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing." As Truman Capote famously remarked apropos the Beats, "It isn't writing at all—it's typing."

What about William S. Burroughs, author of *Naked Lunch* and other Beat classics? Everyone from Norman Mailer and Mary McCarthy has hailed Burroughs as a genius. Jack Kerouac wrote that Burroughs was "the greatest satirical writer since Jonathan Swift." (The Beats specialized in plumping one another's work.) Unfortunately, no representative passage of Burroughs's work can be quoted here, but suffice it to say that all his novels consist of a demotic stream-of-consciousness narrative where scenes of sodomy, torture, and drug abuse recur with mind-numbing repetitiveness.

And Allen Ginsberg? David Ross confidently refers to him as a "great American poet." Much of his work, too, resists citation outside the pages of pornography, but it is possible to provide readers with at least a soupçon of Ginsberg's poetic achievement. There is "Howl" (1955–56), of course, Ginsberg's most famous poem: "I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,/ dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix." Of course, they weren't the "best minds" of his generation, not by a long shot. But the bloated, quasi-Whitmanesque rhetoric is *echt* Ginsberg, as is the celebration of drugs and, later, the adolescent anti-Americanism and infatuation with dirty words. What, I wonder, would a teacher of high-school creative writing say about this, a fragment from Ginsberg's "Capitol Air" (1980)?

> I don't like the government where I live
> I don't like the dictatorship of the Rich
> I don't like bureaucrats telling me what to eat
> I don't like Police dogs sniffing round my feet

Or this, from a "religious" poem of 1973

> OM—the pride of perfumed money, music food from China, a place to sit quiet.
> MA—How jealous! the million Pentagon myrmidons with dollar billions to spend on Rock & Roll, restaurant high throne in sky filled with Electric Bombers—Ah! how jealous they are of the thin stomached Vietnamese boy.
> NI— Lust in the heart for the pink tender prick'd school-boy upstairs bedroom naked with his books, high school locker shower, stretching on the bed, the young guitar player's ass.

No wonder Ginsberg, in an introduction he contributed to the exhibition catalogue, emphasizes the connection between "Beat" and "words like beatitude and beatific—the necessary beatness or darkness that precedes opening up to light, egolessness, giving room for religious illumination."

In that same introduction Ginsberg enumerates what he regards as the "essential ef-

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fects" of the Beat Generation: "spiritual liberation, sexual 'revolution' or 'liberation,' " "the evolution of rhythm and blues into rock and roll as a high art form," and "opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization." A fair summary, so long as one remembers that what Ginsberg means by "liberation" is simply hedonistic self-indulgence, that rock music did not "evolve" into high art but merely made it more difficult to hear and appreciate art's delicate sonorities, and that the "opposition" he speaks of is merely the hypocritical posturing of a pampered beneficiary of advanced capitalist society. But on the essential point Ginsberg was absolutely correct: the legacy of the Beat generation lies not in the literary or artistic realm; it is an instrument of moral indoctrination. That is to say, Beat was not primarily an art or literary movement but a form of life. As Lisa Phillips notes, for the Beats, "Art and life were inseparable." The question is, was it a desirable or worthwhile form of life?

In a curious way, this question is also raised by Wendy Steiner's latest contribution to the culture wars, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism.*[2] What makes the connection curious is that Miss Steiner, the Richard L. Fisher Professor of English and chairman of the English department at the University of Pennsylvania, begins her short tract by declaring that she is out "to defend aesthetic pleasure, to insist that art is different from life, to champion freedom of speech and thought." In the event, *The Scandal of Pleasure* defends the standard radical academic menu, from the sado-masochistic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe (a model of "fearlessness") to the various critical deformations that have destroyed literary studies in the academy. (In one revealing passage, Miss Steiner observes that, for some reason, the New Critics "never referred to their approach as fetishism": "It took figures like Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille," she says, "to champion fetishism openly.")

Miss Steiner assures readers that she wishes to reinvigorate the ideal of the "liberal" academy. In fact, what she advocates is a blueprint for the continued radicalization of education and culture. At the center of her argument is the distinction between academically enfranchised "experts," such as herself, and the undiscerning public, whom she describes as the "laity." The problem, as she sees it, is how the coterie of experts can best protect themselves from the obtuse criticism of the "laity." This, of course, is the sheerest arrogance. And anyone who troubles to read through her blundering attempts to interpret Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro"—to say nothing of her amazingly ill-informed notion of what constitutes aesthetic pleasure—will have plenty of reason to doubt her self-proclaimed status as an "expert." Miss Steiner describes her book as "an argument for the subjectivity of aesthetic response." Indeed. It is so subjective that Miss Steiner can give no better reason for preferring one poem to another than she could for preferring white wine to red. As Kant pointed out long ago, it is a peculiarity of aesthetic judgments to be both subjective *and* universal, which is one reason that he held that "taste makes possible the transition . . . from the charm of sense to habitual moral interest." Miss Steiner holds up "pleasure" as her criterion of aesthetic delectation; but it is a coarse, wholly subjective pleasure that she advocates, which is why she can find no reason to repudiate the extravagances of someone like Robert Mapplethorpe. Unrestricted pleasure has always been the watchword of the counterculture; this is one of the many things that link it with barbarism. (Savages, Walter Bagehot once observed, prefer "short spasms of greedy pleasure to mild and equable enjoyment.") Aristotle was right that moral virtue is the quality of acting in the best way in relation to pleasures and pains. But for the Beat sensibility, as for Miss Steiner, there is no "best way." There is only more or less.

2 *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism*, by Wendy Steiner; University of Chicago Press, 251 pages, $24.95.

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Adam Smith, the sensible philosopher

by David Frum

Of all the great teachers of mankind, can any have lived a duller life than Adam Smith? Between his birth in 1723 and his death in 1790, he seems to have done nothing but read, lecture, travel once to Europe as tutor to a young duke, work as a customs commissioner, and (of course) write.

Nor did he leave behind a record of a particularly interesting personality. His books occasionally glint with wry wit, but Smith himself seems to have been a singularly unamusing man. As a young schoolteacher in Smith's home village of Kirkcaldy, Thomas Carlyle—not exactly a barrel of laughs himself—complained of a dinner given in honor of the birthday of the wife of Smith's aristocratic pupil: "The Fare was Sumptuous, but the Company was formal and Dull. Adam Smith their only Familiar at Table, was but ill qualifi'd to promote the Jollity of a Birthday . . ." Carlyle's assessment was echoed even by Smith's friends, who, though praising his kindliness, did warn new acquaintances about the economist's propensity for collaring people at parties and lecturing them unstoppably.

Smith, in other words, did not leave very much for a biographer to work with. If the new *Life of Adam Smith*—the first biography in a century—is tedious almost beyond endurance, the fault is not entirely the author's.[1] Ian Simpson Ross has painstakingly gathered and sifted all the facts of Smith's life; he has dutifully performed a task for which other academics will be grateful. The book is not, however, one that will be read for or with pleasure.

It's a sadly missed opportunity. How Adam Smith came to think as he did is a question that probably never mattered more than it does now. Not since the original publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 have so many countries attempted the painful transition from statism to freedom as in our day. More than ever before, Adam Smith must be reckoned the most influential political thinker of the modern world. At the same time, he retains the distinction of being the most reviled one. From the halls of the French bureaucracy to the seminar rooms of Midwestern universities, from the mosques of Qom to the mansions of Sir James Goldsmith, Smith stands accused of a litany of monstrous crimes: destroying revered ways of life and oppressing women, ignoring God's law and imposing an allegedly near-totalitarian monopoly of "neoliberal" thought. Almost every grievance our world contains sooner or later turns into an indictment of this gentle Scotsman.

What has offended critics, past and present, about Smith is not his supposed defense of selfishness and egotism; proponents of much more extreme and violent egotism—Friedrich Nietzsche, the pop psychologists of the 1960s and 1970s—elicit nowhere near as much dislike. Smith has

1 *The Life of Adam Smith*, by Ian Simpson Ross; Oxford University Press, 495 pages, $35.

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been regarded as obnoxious, not because he advocates egotism but because he takes it for granted as an inescapable fact of human character, and then suggests the means by which a virtuous society can put that fact to use. Smith, in a sense, falls between two camps. Those who dream of a harmonious social order, like feminists and Marxists, are affronted by his appraisal of human nature as unavoidably self-interested. On the other hand, those willing to accept a darker reading of human nature, such as Michel Foucault and other students of Nietzsche, loathe Smith's prim vision of an invisible hand subduing the individual will and leading free individuals toward mutual cooperation. Smith is both anti-utopian and anti-Promethean; his work rebukes the loftiest of dreams and the most desperate of desires. It's a wonder, really, that there's anybody willing to buy a necktie with his profile on it.

Some eyebrows may rise at the suggestion that the author of *The Wealth of Nations* should be considered a political philosopher. Smith's masterwork devotes most of its energy to an attack on British commercial policies abandoned a century and a half ago. It's packed with frequently dry discussions of what seem to be technical issues. Smith scarcely bothers to address all sorts of questions that might be considered fundamental to his argument, including the most fundamental of all: why is wealth good? And as a result, like many of the philosophers who have written in English—such as Locke and Madison, Dicey and Hayek—Smith has usually been considered something less than *salonfähig* by the directors of admissions to the departments of political theory. Smith, like his Scottish and English colleagues, seems so commonplace and contented, so unwilling to grapple with the dark and morbid aspects of human personality, so hostile to the lofty and the adventuresome, so readily accessible to the casual reader, and so uninterested in metaphysics. Nietzsche and Heidegger, Machiavelli and Hegel—those are the thinkers worthy of attention and respect.

And this attitude is by no means confined to ideological opponents of liberal democracy. The disciples of Leo Strauss express, if anything, an even more patronizing attitude toward the authors of the political system that they as citizens wholeheartedly endorse. It's dangerously easy to forget that the real test of a political thinker is not the complexity and ingenuity of his reasoning, but the effect of his ideas when applied in practice. If you wouldn't care for a moment to live in the sort of world imagined by Plato or Heidegger, what on earth does it mean to say that you regard those two men as more substantial thinkers than sensible old Smith?

Judge by results. Smith deserves to be taken seriously, not just as a guide to public policy but as a thinker about politics. In order to take him seriously, though, we must first take seriously the questions that mattered to him. And it is here that we could have used a little more help from his biographer.

Smith was born in a poor country that had only recently been annexed by a vastly wealthier one. On both sides of the Anglo-Scottish border, most of the wealth belonged to people who either descended from successful practitioners of violence or courtiers who had been rewarded by enormous gifts from the Crown. It was a world that most of us now would regard as a horribly unjust one, and in at least one way, it seemed to be getting worse. Over Smith's lifetime, Europe, and especially England, enjoyed a huge growth in trade and prosperity. Some of that new wealth did indeed trickle down to the people who needed it most, but pathetically little. Inspired by the example of their social betters, the growing class of merchants figured out that the fastest and safest route to wealth lay through government favoritism; in the name of national security, they demanded and received a barrage of monopolies, tariff exclusions, and special favors at the expense of the consumers of their products. We call this system of organized plunder "mercantilism,"

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and it is not without its apologists even today.

Smith was a man of the Enlightenment, an intimate of David Hume's and a friend of Voltaire's. (A new paper by Professor Samuel Fleischacker of Williams College demonstrates that he was also a major intellectual influence on Immanuel Kant.) He shared that too-often-maligned era's hatred of unnecessary suffering. At the same time, he understood its disdain for empty sentimentality, a disdain as alien to our time as the era's powdered wigs. He observed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that

> if you would implant public virtue in the breast of him who seems heedless of his country, it will often be to no purpose to tell him what superior advantages the inhabitants of a well-governed state enjoy; that they are better lodged, that they are better clothed, that they are better fed. These considerations will commonly make no great impression. You will be more likely to persuade, if you describe the great system of public policy which procures these advantages, if you explain the connexions and dependencies of its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of society; if you show how this system might be introduced into his own country, what it is that hinders it from taking place there at present, how these obstructions might be removed, and all the several wheels of the machinery of government be made to move with more harmony and smoothness, without grating upon one another, or mutually retarding one another's motions. It is scarce possible that a man should listen to a discourse of this kind, and not feel himself animated to some degree of public spirit. He will, at least for the moment, feel some desire to remove those obstructions, and to put into motion so beautiful and so orderly a machine.

The Wealth of Nations likewise represents itself as concerned not with the suffering and happiness of the individual but with the strength of the state. "In modern war the great expence [*sic*] of fire-arms gives an evident to the nation which can best afford that expence . . ." Money, says Smith, wins wars. In a misguided attempt to obtain this war-winning money, nations have heaped restrictions on trade—incidentally impoverishing their poorest citizens. But the truth is that it's freedom of trade that produces national wealth and thus national security; and, incidentally, relieves want and raises wages.

Smith will concede, when confronted with a particularly stubborn mercantilist prejudice (such as England's Navigation Acts, which—like the still-surviving Jones Act in the U.S.—required goods carried between English ports to be carried on English ships) that "defense is more important than opulence." But the concession, even if sincere, is quickly withdrawn. Smith deftly discredits old-republican fantasies that it's anything other than "opulence" that determines the strength of a nation's defenses. Smith observed in one of his lectures on jurisprudence, cited by Ross, that "in the year 1745 four or 5 thousand naked unarmed Highlanders took possession of the improved parts of this country [Scotland] without any opposition from the unwarlike inhabitants. They penetrated into England and alarmed the whole nation, and had they not been opposed by a standing army they would have seized the throne with little difficulty." But of course, the Highlanders *were* opposed by a standing army, because rich nations can afford to raise them.

What rich nations can also afford to do—what they cannot help doing—is to distribute the benefits of wealth ever more widely. Smith noticed economic growth's possible ills, but he firmly believed in its happy effects. When we read accounts of the first impact of the Industrial Revolution in England, when we see the same process unleashed in Colombo or Shanghai, we are naturally appalled. Our horror, though, testifies principally to our ignorance of the even more hideous poverty that prevailed beforehand. The benefits that the English poor earned by moving from the countryside to the slums of the new cities are

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heartbreaking in their humility—earthenware plates instead of wooden, underwear, tea, and sugar—but they aren't any less real for their littleness. Neither are the scarcely less humble acquisitions of the toiling poor of East Asia and Central America. A bicycle, a radio, a package of aspirin, some pork with their rice, shoes rather than sandals: for these things, villagers worldwide are delighted to shatter what has been glamorized as "the world we have lost." Good riddance, they say with Smith. Who can find it in his heart to disagree with them?

Some contemporary critics of Smith's economics complain that the economic freedom liberates a destructive acquisitiveness. Smith was no apologist for greed. His teaching at Glasgow University had brought him into contact with the merchants of that town, and he didn't care for them one bit. He much preferred the company of landowners. But Smith also knew that acquisitiveness was an indelible human characteristic. That's what he meant by his celebrated observation that "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner." He would not have been impressed for a moment by the argument, floated by some contemporary adherents of what's euphemistically called "communitarianism," that we eliminate greed by diverting the focus of acquisitiveness from productive enterprise to bureaucratic machinations.

Smith's great insight was that self-interest can be put to use by a virtuous society. Others had made similar points before—Mandeville in his "Fable of the Bees" for example—but with a crucial difference of emphasis. Smith's predecessors argued that the profusion and waste of the rich brought a living to the poor. They might be described as proto-Keynesians. Smith's message was less cynical. If you reduce the number of opportunities to accumulate wealth through exploitation of the political system, you can confine acquisitiveness to the realm where it can do the most good: the elaboration of the principle of the division of labor.

Jerry Z. Muller, in his interesting book *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours*,[2] contends that Smith presupposed certain social virtues as a prerequisite for an effective and just market economy. But one can equally well take the opposite point of view: a society committed to a market economy can—without ever consciously meaning to—promote other social virtues by in advance proscribing the unjust enrichment that pervades statist regimes: regimes like those that Smith observed throughout Europe. Smith chopped to pieces the classical cliché that wealth inevitably led to corruption and decadence. He showed that the same rules that led to economic growth could also inculcate civic virtue by inoculating the body politic against the corruption and injustice of monopoly—while raising to decency and dignity the impoverished poor for whom classical political philosophy cared so little.

The Ross biography does not show us Smith's thought in progress; how his attention was directed to economic problems and the steps by which he developed the analysis that governs the world still. We do learn from it who the dons of Balliol College were when Smith was in attendance there, and I suppose somebody will want to know that. We learn a great deal about the building activities of Smith's father's friends, and I'm sure that information also answers some crying academic need.

But who and what Smith really was, why he thought as he did and how he formed the generous and serene philosophy that makes the late twentieth century, for all its faults, such an agreeable place to live for hundreds of millions of human beings—the answers to those questions, it seems, must wait a while longer.

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2 *Adam Smith in His Times and Ours*, by Jerry Z. Muller; The Free Press, 272 pages, $22.95.

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No Greek & very little Latin: Classical verse in translation

by D. S. Carne-Ross

The Oxford University Press recently published portions of Scripture rewritten in politically correct Newspeak with God the Father purged of his offensive masculinity and transformed into our Father-Mother. It is something of a paradox that the same press should now have brought out this bulky anthology of translated Greek and Latin verse with all its sins on its head. Chaucer is allowed to describe the subject of the *Aeneid* as "the armes and also the man." Should not Rome's founder for decency's sake have been surgeoned into an androgyne?

The Bible, disfigured to conform to today's cultural agenda, can apparently be left us; the ancient classics in translation can also remain. The classics of our own language are faring less well. On many campuses now, the study of English literature is being set aside to let students concentrate on the urgent issues of the day, the politics of gender, class warfare, post-colonial studies, and what not. At Georgetown University, it was recently revealed, English majors may graduate without ever having read Shakespeare and Milton.

Those who find themselves wondering if Pope's prediction, "Art after Art goes out, and all is Night," is not being fulfilled may however discern a spark of comfort in an unexpected quarter. Whatever may be happening in English departments, students wishing to graduate in classics are still expected to show some passing acquaintance with Homer and Virgil. Shielded by their traditional inertia, classicists have not been greatly infected by the rage of destruction which their modern colleagues are directing against the riches they are paid to teach and preserve. Deconstruction never bit very deep into the ancient authors; the politicizing ideologies have so far not done much damage. The retention of Homer and Virgil, however welcome, cannot make up for the loss of Shakespeare and Milton, but at least it provides some ground to stand on and perhaps build from. The classics might, as it were, hold the fort and bear witness. They ran into a dark age before and managed to survive.

A fanciful hope, it must seem, for so few people now read the classical poets in the original that their translators will have to act *in loco parentium*. Can translation bear this burden, a greater one than it has ever been asked to carry? To put the question to the anthology before us[1] is no doubt unfair, since the editors, Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule, nowhere suggest that salvaging what remains of our literary inheritance formed any part of their intention. Unfair, but as things stand to some extent inevitable. Moreover, the unfairness can be mitigated if we take full account of what the editors do valuably have to offer.

1 *The Oxford Book of Classical Verse in Translation*, edited by Adrian Poole and Jeremy Maule; Oxford University Press, 606 pages, $29.95.

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Their aim, they announce, was to seek "the best of classical verse in the best of English translations." This promises well, though it would have been prudent to declare at the outset what they mean by the best. They find room, for instance, for Thomas Drant, who in the 1560s translated Horace's hexameter poems. His version of the *Ars Poetica* begins like this:

> A Paynter if he shoulde adjoyne
> unto a womans heade
> A longe maires necke, and overspred
> the corps in everye steade
> With sondry feathers of straunge huie . . .

The best that could be done for Horace's poem? Hardly, but perhaps these spavined verses are the best that could be done then, the *representative* best of a period that was not yet ready for Horace? A proper enough editorial principle, one that governs many of their choices, but not the one that they profess, and anyway surely even the representative should at least be good of its kind, better at all events than poor Drant.

Some detritus there may no doubt be, but this is not a book to snipe at, conducting us through the whole majestic sequence from Homer to Boethius in chronological order. The translations are not given chronologically, being taken from wherever they are to be found. The editors make a virtue out of what was not quite a necessity (nothing compelled them to select this translation rather than that) by letting versions from different periods rub shoulders, thereby creating "an array of juxtapositions" intended to give "the sense of historical friction" which allows each new rendering to come at us with the force of a "renewed discovery." This has the stimulating effect of destabilizing famous translations and preserving their power to astonish. Here for instance is Achilles, as Pope grandly saw him, putting on the new armor made by Hephaestus in heaven:

> The silver Cuishes first his Thighs infold;
> Then o'er his Breast was brac'd the hollow Gold:
> The brazen Sword a various Baldrick ty'd,
> That, starr'd with Gems, hung glitt'ring by
> his side;
> And like the Moon, the broad refulgent Shield
> Blaz'd with long Rays, and gleam'd athwart
> the Field.

This is followed by Christopher Logue's 1981 treatment of the same passage. Logue does not so much translate the Greek words as imagine the armor's appearance and find his own words for it:

> Bright pads with toggles crossed behind the
> knees,
> Bodice of fitted tungsten, pliable straps;
> His shield as round and rich as moons in
> spring;
> His sword's haft parked between sheaves of
> gray obsidian,
> From which a lucid blade stood out, leaf-
> shaped, adorned
> With running spirals.

Some juxtapositions are less rewarding. The lines from Drant which I quoted are immediately preceded by a passage from one of Pope's imitations of Horace, verse as accomplished as anything our language has to offer. To switch from one to the other is like driving along a highway in a limousine and then finding oneself in a farm cart jolting over a country road. Readers could surely get all the historical friction they require simply by turning a few pages back or forward. They could moreover gain a fuller sense of changes of style if they were allowed to settle down to substantial passages instead of being so often whisked from one brief specimen to another. The editors suffer from an addiction to snippets that is uncommon now, when anthological practice is rather to present complete poems or whole scenes.

Today's practice is not necessarily better than yesterday's, but today's has this real advantage in that it better meets the needs of the reader who does not possess the originals and wants to discover, for ex-

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ample, what sort of poem the *Georgics* is. He is given a number of extracts, some of no more than ten or twenty lines, from which he learns what Virgil has to say about weeds, about winter, about the way to rear calves, about snakes, bees, and so forth. The connoisseur of translation who has the Latin will be interested to see what modern writers like C. Day Lewis or Robert Fitzgerald made of the poem, how C. S. Calverley turned it in the nineteenth century, or Thomson or Crabbe in their day adapted it in original poems, and what Dryden did with it before them. Others may find it puzzling that the *Georgics*, apparently a didactic treatise on agriculture, should have been judged by some to be Virgil's most perfect poem.

To follow the editors in their trek through four and a half centuries of English writing would be impossible, and all that can be done is to ask how the classical poets, first Greek, then Latin, have fared at their hands. Homer, who like Shakespeare can transcend linguistic and temporal barriers, comes off best. Although the harmony of the numbers is lost, in the finest translators much that is essential and eternal is carried across. The 1938 *Oxford Book of Greek Verse in Translation* provides only two extracts from Pope's *Iliad*. By a welcome change of taste we have moved closer to Johnson's estimate: "that poetical wonder . . . a performance which no age or nation can pretend to equal," and Pope is here given pride of place. Chapman and Dryden are well represented; Cowley has a couple of passages, the Earl of Derby a couple in very respectable nineteenth-century blank verse, with Robert Fitzgerald among the traditionalists speaking up for our own century. Richmond Lattimore does not get in, but his successor Robert Fagles does, with a version of the beautiful lines where Thetis and the Nereids lament the coming death of Achilles—far better translated by William Arrowsmith (*Arion*, VI: 3, Autumn 1967).

What of Sappho? The ode to Aphrodite, one of the high places of lyric poetry, is entrusted to Namby-Pamby Philips:

> O *Venus*, Beauty of the Skies,
> To whom a thousand Temples rise,
> Gayly false in gentle Smiles,
> Full of Love-perplexing Wiles.

Possibly in 1711, when these amiable verses appeared, a century before Greek poetry began to come into its own, there were those who thought that this is how Sappho wrote. Few will think so now, and matters are not bettered when a modern version by Suzy Q. Groden follows. Admittedly there is not much to be done with Sappho (except learn some Greek), and the editors raise our drooping spirits not with another translation but with a poem inspired by Sappho, Swinburne's "Sapphics," not Sappho's own chaste speech but Sappho speaking as she might have done had she lived in London in the later nineteenth century:

> Saw the white implacable Aphrodite,
> Saw the hair unbound and the feet
> unsandalled
> Shine as fire of sunset on western waters;
> Saw the reluctant
>
> Feet, the straining plumes of the doves
> that drew her . . .

The inclusion of original poems with no immediate indication that this is what they are is an excellent feature of the anthology, giving us something we recognize as poetry in a way that even the best translation can seldom do. The same good license allows for the inclusion of Housman's "The weeping Pleiads wester," suggested by the lovely quatrain *Deduke men a selanna*, and room might also have been found for Landor's "Mother, I cannot mind my wheel."

Move forward a hundred and fifty years to a mountain range, Attic tragedy, a classroom staple in those institutions where the study of literature still survives. A disaster area, alas. Gorgeous tragedy will not come sweeping by in any language within our reach today—the scenes in stately iambics for the most part distant from the Greek spoken by those who attended the plays, the

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odes far more difficult and metrically more complex than any poetry known to us. The form is nearly untranslatable and yet translations are required—and publishers eager to provide them.

For the *Oresteia*, as formidable an obstacle as anything to be found in ancient literature, the editors draw on two modern versions of the whole trilogy, one modern version of the *Agamemnon* alone and two from the nineteenth century. First Browning's: his purpose, he said, was to reproduce "the very turn of each Greek phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear," but as the hedging clause reveals, his nerve often fails him. Coming to the passage where the sons of Atreus hear the prophet hinting darkly at the terrible thing that must be done to allow their becalmed ships to sail for Troy, he writes: "So that the Atreidai striking staves on earth/ Could not withhold the tear." Literally the Greek words run: "so that the-earth-with-their-staffs-striking Atreidai did not withhold their tears." These heavily compounded phrases are not natural in English but our resourceful language will bear them, as Hopkins showed when he wrote of the Falcon "in his riding/ Of the rolling level underneath him steady air."

We don't want much of this, but it would have been valuable to have possessed what Browning might have given us and could have done had he been bold enough, one English example of the extreme form of Greek translation achieved in snatches by Hölderlin in his experimental treatment of Pindar. Still Browning's *Agamemnon* was worth including, at least on the representative criterion. This cannot be said of the next extract, Helen's flight to Troy done in trivial ballad meter by Edward Fitzgerald, or of Louis MacNeice's over-praised too literal rendering of an ode, still less of some rant from Fagles. The selection from the *Oresteia* (only seven pages) ends with Tony Harrison's version of the Furies' Binding Song, acceptable perhaps in the performance for which it was written.

The best that could be done for this great work? No. The editors could have gone to the one translation of the whole trilogy that gives us any real sense of how Aeschylus wrote, George Thomson's, and printed at least a whole scene with the accompanying ode. Apparently it failed to meet their standards, though it met Auden's well enough for him to give it entire in his Viking *Portable Greek Reader*. Listen to Thomson's Orestes as he holds up the clothes in which Clytemnestra, whom he has just killed, entangled and killed her husband:

> And as I greet this web that wove his death,
> I weep for all things done and suffered here,
> For the whole race, and weep for my own fate,
> Marked with the stains of this sad victory . . .
> So then, to tell you plainly—I know not what
> My end will be—my wits are out of hand,
> Like horses that with victory in sight
> Stampede out of the course, and in my heart
> As fear strikes up her tune, the dance begins.[2]

What of Sophocles? The translator of this poet must seek to write as Milton wrote in *Samson Agonistes*:

> A little onward lend thy guiding hand
> To these dark steps, a little further on.

Words not necessarily remarkable in themselves set down in such a way that we feel no force on earth will ever shift them, the quality that Hopkins may have had in mind when he spoke of finding in Milton's verse something "necessary and eternal." Here and here alone is a match for the perfect gravity of Sophocles. An impossible standard, yes, but are we to continue to foist on the undergraduate classroom this lord of language speaking today's drab? Since there is no use asking for miracles, the only course, it seems to me, is to forget about the poetry and use prose versions of the kind that can be made to serve for Dante.

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2 "The dance" depends on a plausible emendation. Thomson's Greek text is unfortunate to say the least, but does no serious damage to his translation.

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Still, the extracts chosen show that, while acceptable translation of a complete play is almost too much to hope for (though Robert Fitzgerald's of the *Oedipus Coloneus*, not represented here, is of real quality), single passages that read like poetry can be found. Thomas Francklin, writing sound eighteenth-century iambics, does well with Tecmessa's appeal to Ajax, so too Calverley in the next century with Ajax's great speech on time. Housman is grandly Swinburnian with the ode on old age in the *Coloneus*:

> What man is he that yearneth
> For length unmeasured of days?
> Folly mine eye discerneth
> Encompassing all his ways.

The diction is as far from today's required *sermo pedester* as Sophocles' diction is from everyday talk but close to the way that he wrote. Dudley Fitts and Fitzgerald are rather splendid with the parodos of the *Oedipus Rex*, even if there may be a touch of tinsel here and there; E. R. Dodds handles an ode from the *Antigone* at a level seldom achieved by Greek professors; the ode in praise of Colonus is given to Yeats. The master poet of our own century could not be more unlike the Athenian master, but his presence here serves to remind us that we are in the presence of a great poet.

Euripides, in whose Greek there is less to make the translator despair, comes across passably well, with Shelley on the *Cyclops*, both Brownings (Robert not trying here to sound Greek, Elizabeth Barrett a more skillful performer in this difficult art than I think is usually recognized), and other lesser names. The most vivid poetic presence is an ode from the *Iphigeneia at Aulis* by H. D. in the Imagist manner, cut, shaped phrases more like Greek lyric than anything we have. Gilbert Murray is not included, the Greek translator general of his day as Lattimore, who is included, has been of a more recent day. Murray's translations have admittedly not worn well and never really recovered from Eliot's brilliant, waspish essay of 1918 (he "has simply interposed between Euripedes and ourselves a barrier more impenetrable than the Greek language"), but he brought Euripides to the general public, and there is no doubt that many people enjoyed him. Something could and should have been found from Murray—the agile little ode from the *Rhesus*, for example, beginning "Say, whose is the watch?"

Two great fifth-century poets still lie on our path, Pindar and Aristophanes, both in their different ways as resistant to translation as the tragedians. Though seldom much loved, Pindar has traditionally been granted high status, a great poet, Poole and Maule would have us believe, who wrote like this: "The lov'd *Syracusian*, the prince of the course,/ The king, who delights in the speed of the horse."

Namby-Pamby at it again. The difficulty of finding even adequate translations of Pindar is so great that the editors may have envied the liberty of exclusion enjoyed by Charles Tomlinson, whose judicious *The Oxford Book of English Verse in Translation* includes nothing from Pindar. For historical reasons they probably felt bound to give one of Cowley's Pindaricks. Though preposterously inflated and unfaithful to Pindar in everything that matters, Cowley was a poet and comes out with some resounding lines. Since we believe that we have now reached a truer sense of Pindar's art, it might be hoped that today's translators would serve him more faithfully. The two moderns to be found here are Robert Fagles and Frank J. Nisetich. Fagles, who is not a poet, can be as tumid as Cowley:

> O Aglaia the glow
> of Triumph, throb of the choirs Euphrosyne
> sprung by the Spanning Arch of Gods.

What is the Spanning Arch of Gods? No use asking Pindar; he is not to blame. Nisetich is at least dull, inert phrases splayed across the page in a spurious colometry that presumably hopes to pass as verse. He usually gives you the sense, but prose could

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do it more decently. With less than their usual diligence the editors missed two modern translators who show that Pindar did write poetry. That gifted latter-day makar Robert Garioch, too little honored in his lifetime, rendered in a gloriously aureate Scots that recalls Dunbar the substantial fragment composed for a Corinthian victor who celebrated his achievement by dedicating a hundred hierodules to the temple of Aphrodite:

> Your daywerk is the amber tears to brenn
> of frankincense in reikie sacrifie
> and aftentimes ye ettle, figan-faine
> to birl in tourbillions of ecstasie
> abuin the beryall firmament on hie
> whaur luve consecrat bleizes til a sterne
> and preclair Aphrodite reigns superne.

There may well be no way of letting opulent Pindar, as Lionel Johnson called him, speak out full-throated in today's English, but another line of approach is open. A leaner more parsimonious Pindar emerges in some free versions by the Canadian poet David Wevill, watercolor sketches that help one to understand why an acute verbal critic M. S. Silk called Pindar the "master of the delicate style."

And there is Aristophanes, the reigning poet of Old Comedy, the marvelous unrepeatable genre that died with the fall of Athens: knock-about often decidedly rough fun that has at call the most refined verbal artistry, elect lyric poetry, and rural piety shot through with what we wrongly call obscenity. (How can sexual horseplay that makes the crops grow be obscene?) All too often this great writer has been thought to deserve nothing better than red-necked buffoonery so blatant that even the groundlings hardly guffaw. The editors spare the poet and ourselves this indignity and are to be commended for providing some agreeable pieces. Benjamin Blickley Rogers obliges with a good Gilbertian patter song, sub-Aristophanic but better than the meterless stuff we often get; Oscar Wilde does an ode from the *Clouds* tastefully; and from the same play, a real trouvaille, we have the argument between Strepsiades and his son by the admirable Thomas Stanley, whose 1664 Aeschylus, the Greek faced by a Latin translation, brought this poet within reach of the general reader. One strange omission has to be deplored. Instead of Swinburne's ode from the *Birds*, in ringing anapaestic heptameters little inferior to the superb original, we have the 1839 version by John Hookham Frere, which jiggets along merrily enough but without a trace of poetry.

A more understandable but still regrettable omission is the very lively and inventive version from America of the *Peace* by Tim Reynolds, fueled by the turmoils of the Vietnam War and done in a variety of parodied southern dialects. It never received more than periodical publication (the first part in *Delos* 1, 1968, the remainder in *Arion*, VI: 4, Winter 1967). The editors would have done Aristophanes a service by bringing this work to the attention of a wider public.

The great wave of Greek poetry returned no more after the end of the fifth century. The final section of the Greek part of the anthology has less to detain us, but there is one notable name, Theocritus, whose pastorals created a tradition that lasted till the middle years of Victoria. Calverley does well with the beautiful conclusion of the seventh idyll, but the sweetness of this poet's best work has proved out of reach. The translator would need not so much to translate the words as to bring alive in himself the world that lies behind the words, the world to which Baudelaire pointed when he wrote: "Tout poëte lyrique, en vertu de sa nature, opère fatalement un retour vers l'Eden perdu." Two later, less-demanding pastoralists are more approachable, Moschus with his lament for the poet Bion ("that lovely wail beside the Sicilian waters," J. W. Mackail called it in an earlier day), and Bion's lament for Adonis. Both poems are given in the translations by Dryden's protégé John Oldham, writing with a lyrical grace one does not associate with this poet, better known for the rough-edged Juve-

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nalian cast of his satirical verse. These two translations are among the vivid pleasures of the anthology.

Roman poetry on the whole fares better. Latin, though less dear to some of us, is closer than Greek, which is often half out of reach. And in the present situation where many translators lack a classical training and have to rely on prose trots, Latin has the advantage that many of the words look like English words, even if they don't mean the same thing.

As with the Greek selection, all that can be done with the three hundred pages of translation is to see which poets come alive in our language, and, to put the question I am asking, how far a reader with little or no Latin can from the work provided here form an idea of the poetic achievement of Rome.

The editors begin with Ennius, father Ennius as Horace called him, a reasonable place to start, but it would have been exciting to reach further back to that antique *sacre du printemps*, the Hymn of the Arval Brotherhood, a song for seedtime still potent with the urgencies of survival even if the words are only in part comprehensible:

> neue lue rue, Marmar, sins incurrere pleoris.

Janet Lembke, another American poet the editors missed, made a bold stab at this mysterious piece:

> guard fiercely the pale sprout that roots
> in the tender earth
> guard fiercely the soft calf that swims
> in the dark before birth
> guard fiercely the red life that screams
> into this world.

With Ennius, too, a substantial poet surviving only in fragments, Lembke could again have been called on. She adventurously knitted together bits and pieces of his work and made poems out of them. The scholar, the purist, would no doubt prefer to leave him in the ruined state in which time has handed him down, but the poet who wrote of himself, "I wing my way living on the lips of men," would surely have welcomed the attempt to bring him back to life, even if the life is only partly his.

Lucretius is splendid with Spenser in the sixteenth century and with Dryden in the seventeenth, despite that author's perhaps undue relish for passages that allow him to be raunchy. The years that follow offer Lucretius less, and today there is no translation of the *De rerum* that reads like a poem. Catullus too does best in earlier centuries, in the seventeenth a prince of lyric poetry for Jonson and his tribe and for Campion, who brings to that clenched, painful poem, *Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*, a note of enchantment: "Silly Tray-tresse, who shall now thy careless tresses place?" Hyphenated, if that is how it should be, "Tray-tresse," echoed by "tresses," sounds like a playful love name, keeping below the level of attention the ugly word traitress, further softened by the adjective. Seldom if ever again was Catullus to be open to so delicate a *détournement*. (Students of historical friction will look across the page to observe Louis and Celia Zukofsky at their antic homophony: "Miss her, Catullus? don't be so inept to rail.")

Leigh Hunt two centuries later is pretty, but no more than pretty, with the radiant marriage poem for Julia and Manlius, where Catullus makes his Aeolic meter sing as though he were writing Greek not Latin. To today's lumpenproletariat of translation, Catullus has proved all too appealing, and people lacking the minimal requirements turn disciplined verse into a formless shambles. These productions the editors spare us, but there is one bad fall from grace, their treatment of the Attis poem, the strangest and some have thought the greatest in Latin, about a votary of the Phrygian Mother Goddess who castrates himself in his service to her. Fifty lines are lopped from this poem of ninety-three lines in which there is nothing to be spared, though it must be admitted that the translation they choose, stuffed with much unwanted free

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invention, by one Robert Clayton Casto, can be lopped with advantage. But why choose it, when we have from Peter Whigham as fine a version as one can hope for? As no one else has done, Whigham conveys the jerky, convulsive movement of Catullus's very difficult meter and, in lines like "with rabid abandon brighten Dindymia's face," the obsessive drumbeat of the Goddess' savage cult.

And then Virgil. As Dryden knew, Virgil cannot be translated and yet must be and through all our centuries repeatedly has been, even though the answer to Dante's awed question, "Or se' tu quel Virgilio?" is always no. There is little to be done with a poet who has the Shakespearian gift of writing lines that seem not the creation of a single author but the choric voice of all mankind. The editors nonetheless serve him well and the only bad fault is the inclusion of Charles Cotton's 1664 travesty of the prelude to the *Aeneid*, worth a snigger perhaps in the days when schoolboys were hauled through the poem line by line but quite out of place in a modern anthology claiming to offer the best of the best.

Apart from this buffoonery, the *Aeneid* is left in the hands of translators who can write, even if here again one would have wished for longer passages from the major figures, Gavin Douglas and Dryden, with less space for those who, while decent enough, are primarily representative. Not that one grudges, if only for the fun of it, the page given to Richard Stanyhurst, who is not decent at all and representative only of himself, for his manhandling in uncouth Tudor hexameters of the first four books of the poem is a *monstrum horrendum* unparalleled in the annals of translation. (Polyphemus: "His tusk grimly gnashing, in seas far waltred, he groyleth." His companions follow: "the rowncival helswarme/ Of Cyclopan lurdens to the shoars in coompanie clustring.")

Virgil's friend Horace comes next, rightly granted ample space (fifty-nine pages—one recalls though that the *Oresteia* only got seven). Often called untranslatable, Horace's odes have in fact inspired a host of translations and imitations by writers of great and lesser note. The roll call is impressive. In the sequence imposed by the editors: Robert Lowell, Milton, the Edinburgh scull-thacker (wig-maker) Allan Ramsay, Smart, Crabbe, Dryden, Bunting (overrated as a translator?), Cowley, tragic Robert Fergusson who died at twenty-three a pauper lunatic in the Edinburgh Bedlam, Pound, Cowper, Louis MacNeice, Thomas Creech (more deserving than his reputation would suggest), Surrey (but not Sidney, a finer sixteenth-century Horatian), early Byron and Tennyson, Pope, Housman, Jonson (but not Johnson?).

Only two bad omissions. Of *Odes* II.14, *Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume*, there is one decisive version, from our own day, by C. H. Sisson. The editors read Sisson for they include part of his witty imitation of the once much loved second epode, *Beatus ille*. Yet instead of his translation of the Postumus ode they give one by a John Potenger from 1685, one by the Swan of Lichfield, Anna Seward, emollient verses unsuited to this great and somber poem. Far more unpardonably, Philip Francis is completely ignored. His translation of the complete *Odes* (and at a lesser level of the *Satires* and *Epistles*) appeared in the 1740s, was reprinted nine times in the course of the century, and praised by Johnson: "Francis has done it best; I'll take his, five out of six, against them all." A judgment that can still stand, even though this great translator now has a companion. It is heartening to be able to report that a Horace speaking with the voice of our own day is being reborn on the banks of the Charles in Cambridge, Massachusetts. David Ferry has been working on the *Odes* for some time and his book of translations, all one hundred and three odes plus the *Carmen saeculare*, will be before the public in a year or so.

The hexameter poems come off less well, thanks to the editorial addiction to snippets, and there are a number of odd choices. The

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assumption seems to be that whatever is not known to the general is thereby caviar, and the editors go to the trouble of digging up a passage from William King's 1709 *The Art of Cookery*, a would-be funny mimicry of the *Ars Poetica*, and some lines from *The Harlequin Horace* of 1735 by James Miller. It is unconscionable to exhume these trivia from the soft underbelly of Augustan imitation when no sustained attention is given to Pope's *Imitations of Horace*, complex recreations which bring two great poets together in a vital interplay hard to parallel in literature.

Pope imitated Horace, in the special sense the word had then, he did not translate him. For what is arguably the best rendering of the hexameter poems the editor should have drawn on Francis Howes, whose *Epodes, Satires, and Epistles of Horace*, though published as late as 1845, still has the idiomatic verve and poise of the best eighteenth-century work. Howes's book was quickly forgotten and today is buried in still deeper oblivion than Francis's translation of the *Odes*. (One of Howes's epistles, included in Tomlinson's anthology, could have alerted the editors to his merits.) Translators, to whom the ongoing life of literature owes so much, have always been an ill-rewarded tribe.

Ovid comes next, a great figure in the Middle Ages, no less so in the seventeenth century; both Shakespeare and Milton saw fit to draw on him. His reputation began to fade in the years to come and in our own day he has had few whole-hearted admirers except Pound, whose retelling in his second canto of the story of Bacchus on the pirate ship from the third book of the *Metamorphoses* could well have been included. With Ovid this book does one of the things I think it ought to do, provide the general reader puzzled by his former celebrity with the means of judging why he was so much loved. Pound saw a poet very close to him in Arthur Golding's sixteenth-century translation of the *Metamorphoses*, well represented here, which he went so far as to call "the most beautiful book in the language." The medieval note that he admired in Golding vanishes with Dryden, also well represented, but other virtues come to take its place.

Not much of interest has been done with Ovid in the present century, but two admirable translations are to be found here, one from the *Amores* by the Ulster poet Derek Mahon in cleverly handled octosyllabic couplets with much pleasing variation in pause and rhythm, the whole treated with a playful elegance that catches the tone of the Latin. A more troubled Ovid is heard in another contemporary version, from the *Tristia*, by David R. Slavitt, which carries the original to us across two millennia with the directness of personal address while observing the proper decorum of verse. Here is Ovid, a man pre-eminently of the capital exiled to a barbarous region of the world, remembering the desperate night when he packed his bags, trying to decide what to take with him. "That preposterous shepherd's cloak"? Oh well, put it in—I may need it there. These two poets are among the book's rewarding presences.

The parade of fine once famous names continues. Propertius: a sequence from Pound's "Homage" rightly comes first, followed by Jim Powell with the poem where Cynthia's ghost reproaches the poet for his neglect, a good translation without doubt, but not so good that it should have excluded the superb version by Lowell from *Lord Weary's Castle*. Tibullus: two from the eighteenth century, one modern by Michael Longley, inferior to George Fraser's version of the opening elegy of Book One, which does not insist so hard on its modernity. Seneca: far from the great figure he once was, though he was successfully brought to the London stage some years ago by Ted Hughes in the staccato version included here, which probably acted better than it reads.[3] Lucan: only twenty-four lines from

3 In a brilliant essay in *Arion* V: 4, Winter 1966, "Senecan Tragedy," John Herington pointed to the qualities which made Seneca so strong a presence

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Marlowe's translation of the *Pharsalia* where the art of narrative blank verse is captured at one stroke. "It is of very great merit," C. S. Lewis, who hated Marlowe, reluctantly admitted. Martial: often and finely translated in the seventeenth century, less well today. One is perplexed not to find Peter Porter, whose versions from Martial are always stylish and sufficiently formal. Few if any Latin poets can be done in "free" verse, a misnomer that should never have been allowed to stand. (Pound's "Homage" is another matter: Pound is Pound.) And then there is Juvenal, the one classical poet of whom it can be said that those who know him only in translation find much of what they should find there, thanks to his luck in falling into two great hands. Dryden, who writes with a massive, magnificent effrontery unmatched in our language:

> Mean time his Lordship lolls within at ease,
> Pamp'ring his Paunch with Foreign Rarities:
> Both Sea and Land are ransack'd for the Feast,
> And his own Gut the sole invited Guest.

Then, a graver moralist than Dryden and indeed than Juvenal, comes Johnson with "London" and "The Vanity of Human Wishes," a poem some would have thought good enough to be given complete. Poole and Maule find room for two extracts.

The final section, "The Late Empire," brings a new note which some may find more appealing because more intimate, closer to us, than anything that went before. The selection opens with the *Pervigilium Veneris*, the Vigil of Venus, rather coarsely translated by Parnell in the early eighteenth century, efficiently but coldly by Allen Tate. This very beautiful poem still awaits its poet. In *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater sensitively imagines the circumstance of its creation. Listening to the poem which catches "something of the rhyming cadence, the sonorous organ-music of the medieval Latin," Marius seems to experience "the foretaste of an entirely novel world of poetic beauty." From Claudian in the later fourth century we have a piece that strikes a disturbingly topical note, well translated by Helen Waddell, about the withdrawal of the Roman legions: "Tonight there is no watch upon the Rhine." NATO's watchmen were stationed not far east of there for much of the second half of this century. They are presumably no longer needed now, but the barbarians are alive and well in once civilized western cities. From Ausonius there are a few charming lines of nature poetry, "Evening on the Moselle," again translated by Waddell, and from the same poem a passage unlike anything in classical verse on the suffering of fish, hooked and hauled to die gasping on the land.[4] Ted Hughes is a strong fish poet, but his fish, habitants of a timeless *Urwelt*, inspire dread rather than compassion. The long story comes to a close with some pieces from Boethius, including one by King Alfred in the original Old English with a prose crib, and one beautiful poem by Vaughan.

This anthology into which much learning and editorial punctilio have gone is, I think, going to prove most valuable to the connoisseur of translation who will enjoy comparing specimens of the art as it has been practiced over the centuries. There is plenty too for the general reader, though he may regret that he is not more often permitted to settle down with substantial passages from the major authors. His opportunity for thoughtful inspection somewhat resembles that of the person on a bus tour of Rome. "This is the Pantheon—please be out in five minutes. We are now driving round the famous Piazza Navona pausing to allow you to admire Bernini's fountain." Celerity, the visitor may murmur with Sir Thomas Browne, should be contempered with cunctation.

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for the Elizabethans and might, he argues, do so again today.

4 A retelling of the *Mosella* in exquisite prose is intricately let into Guy Davenport's story "Wo es war, soll ich werden," included in his collection *The Drummer of the 11th Devonshire Fusiliers*.

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Poems *by Donald Hall, Timothy Murphy & Charles Tomlinson*

The 440

Because I was always
busy writing when we were home, my
son and I did our best
talking in the car. When he was six
we drove from Thaxted
to Cambridge to do the laundry, and I
told him about
running the 440 at Exeter, how
I raced in a JV meet
against a runner named Bill Best
from Dover High School
whom I determined to beat. I sprinted
for the pole and was timed
at the 220 mark two seconds
faster than I ran
the 220 by itself in practice,
but blacked out as I rounded
the goal posts on the final turn,
finishing dead last,
and vomited behind the stadium.
Later the old doctor
said that my heart was enlarged (untrue)
and switched my sport
from Track to Marksmanship.
I told the story
excitedly, eloquent
or proud with remembered failure—

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and looked across
the car seat to see my son's face wet with tears
and heard his passionate
voice implore me to practice again
for the 440, running
on footpaths among Essex farms,
to approach the finish
line kicking, Bill Best a yard ahead.

—*Donald Hall*

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Letter to A. D. Hope

Sir, pardon this unheralded address
from America's Outback. I confess
you daunt me with your storm-wracked *Isle of Aves*
where shipwrecked sailors wager with the waves
while two striplings couple beneath a spar
by the sage sufferance of your scholar-tar
who grants my love and me the tolerance
our hidebound fathers have denied their sons.

Like yours my lines and themes were once writ large.
Alas! my lame pentameters lacked charge.
Heroic couplets? I abandoned hope,
dazzled by one man's art, another's scope.
Dimeter and trimeter I devise
more skillfully, though off-rhyme is my vice.
Forewarned (the very word is like a curse)
please weigh these gleanings from a farmer's verse.

Mine is a rustic art unlike your own:
no high-flown musings on a graven bone
nor gowns cast off for trysts with the unknown,
no successors driven to the despair
suffered daily by your unworthy heir.
Though the estate of poetry seems grim,
young men must hope when prospects look most dim.
I am your servant and disciple—

Tim.

—*Timothy Murphy*

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Verse

The pause at the turn, however infinitesimal,
  Is there to ensure we do not run ahead
Of the heartbeat, the knowledge in the blood
  That will not be hurried beyond a present good
Before it has fed on it. Where are you going
  And towards what beyond, asks the pulsation
To which everything is bound: time to return
  To the paced-out path for those who raced it.

—*Charles Tomlinson*

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Letter from Paris

Andreï Makine's poetics of nostalgia

by Katherine Knorr

French book prizes get more attention when there is a story attached. The book isn't the thing; the author must have a legend. Thus we had Marguerite Duras boasting that *L'Amant* was all a true story, or the prize winner who turned out to be a salesman in a newspaper kiosk.

The story was better than usual this time when both the Médicis and Goncourt prizes were won by Andreï Makine, an impecunious Russian living in a one-room apartment in the Eighteenth Arrondissement. He had been rejected by a number of publishing houses until he pretended that he wrote not in French but in Russian and that he was translated. He had applied for French citizenship and been turned down. He spoke with a heavy accent.

The journalists scrambled to deal with this one. Not everything said was kind. He was proud, and reticent about biographical details tying him too closely to his narrator. It was an eye-opener for Makine when he was asked what he was going to do with the royalties, summoning to his horrified mind visions of video cassette recorders or a quick trip to Martinique. The journalists who had actually read the book almost all came back to the same theme: this was another example of the triumph of the French language.

This might have been just another Goncourt with a good story attached, were it not for the fact that *Le Testament français*,[1] Makine's fourth novel and one of the best books written in French for many years, shows up the shallowness and self-indulgence of a great deal of French (and not only French) contemporary writing. It also demonstrates that the old opposition that cultural bureaucrats and other pensioners are so fond of—between the "avant-garde" and the rest of us squares—has become quite meaningless.

Here is a novel of great stylistic beauty that is also an unflinching account of seventy years of Communist hell. It resembles no other book about the Soviet Union. It is not properly speaking a dissident's book, in no way a documentary or a tract. It is personal without being confessional; it tackles the greatest subjects—death, the power of evil—while warmly chronicling the lives of a family of Russians who, like so many others, were torn apart by the famines, the purges, and the wars.

Le Testament français, published by the Mercure de France, is in the grand tradition of semi-autobiographical works such as Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Ivan Bunin's *The Life of Arseniev*. Makine, who is thirty-eight and has been living here since the middle 1980s, calls Proust and Bunin his two *maîtres à penser*, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on Bunin, who was the first Russian to win the Nobel Prize, in

1 *Le Testement français*, by Andreï Makine; Mercure de France, 309 pages, 120 FF.

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1933, and is now, quite unfairly, almost unknown.

At the same time, Makine's mixed feelings about France—his familiarity with and admiration for French culture, coupled with perplexity at the reigning idea of culture-as-consumer-goods, and what he sees as a veneration of money—fall into another tradition, one he knows well, that of Russian writers and travelers who were both attracted and repulsed by France.

Writing on the question of France's cultural standing in the February issue of *La Nouvelle Revue française*, he cites Turgenev lamenting the decline in French letters around the time when Gustave Flaubert was finishing *L'Education sentimentale.*

Still, things have gotten worse. The artistic success of this book (it is also a popular success, what the French call *un bon Goncourt*, and Makine is going to get his citizenship) points up the silliness of the avant-garde game, the heavily hyped search for the Next Big Thing.

And so here is Makine, the twentieth-century version of those puzzled travelers, amid the contradictions of the opulent West: a prosperous society with an extraordinary cultural heritage and great personal liberty, where the natives are constantly zeroing in on "oppression" and subsidizing barbarous noise-making in the name of freedom, equality, and "creativity." He is not unaware of the irony.

Le Testament français roughly covers this century, as seen or imagined by the narrator, a boy growing up in the Soviet Union in the 1960s and 1970s, deeply marked by the stories of his French grandmother and by her few treasures—books of French poetry, articles about the czar's visit to France in 1896 or the great Paris flood of 1910, tales of the actress La Belle Otero or of the death of the French president in the arms of his mistress.

Her stories have the power of fairy tales and their odd relationship to time. Events have become jumbled in the boy's head, and so Paris emerges from the flood waters like Atlantis to the grand music of the imperial visit. The fairy tales end abruptly when the boy finds old newspapers reporting the abdication of the czar. All the rutilant scenes he had imagined—the theater boxes, the jewels, the extraordinary menus—take on a different glow, for when he thinks again of the stuffed game birds and the chandeliers of the Elysée Palace, he knows another ending. "What is the truth?," he begins to ask himself.

The grandmother, Charlotte Lemonnier, was born in France but moved as a child to Siberia with her father, Norbert, a French doctor, and her much younger mother, Albertine. When Norbert dies, Albertine goes mad. They will eventually return to France, and Charlotte will witness with a child's eyes the happy family scenes and then the tragedy of 1914—the brides, and then the widows.

After Albertine returns to Russia, Charlotte lives with relatives in the Paris suburb of Neuilly, helps out at a makeshift hospital during the war, then goes back to Russia herself in the early 1920s. What she finds, of course, is hell—violence and hunger, people in movement across that vast, devastated land. Her papers are stolen by some official thug, and she is threatened with death as a spy—there will be no going back to Neuilly.

She will eventually marry a Russian, who will be arrested one Christmas and survive, almost by bureaucratic fluke, long enough to go to war. When he comes back, an eternity later, he is a quiet, broken man, covered with scars. He doesn't last long.

Charlotte's grandson will spend summers with her in Saranza, a fictional town in southern Russia ("So was Saranza, poised on the edge of the steppe, in profound astonishment at the infinity that opened before its doors"). At home, in a very different city, stretching with wide Stalinist avenues on both sides of the Volga, the boy will listen to the late-night stories of his parents' generation, to the horrors that Charlotte has left silent.

After he loses his parents, in quick suc-

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cession, he will not quite be able to cry for them:

> When I did cry, I was not crying for having lost them. It was tears of helplessness in front of a stupefying truth: a whole generation of the dead, the mutilated, people who had lost their youths. Tens of millions of beings simply crossed out of life. . . . Yes, if I cried, it was in front of their silent resignation. They didn't blame anyone, they asked for no reparations. They lived and tried to make us happy.

With these three generations, Makine takes us back to the czars and forward to *perestroika* with an extraordinary sharpness of detail. He plays with time, he comes back with poetic insistence on the grandmother's treasures, and on the horror, starvation, cannibalism, the camps, the mass graves. Death is brutal and senseless, and then all is quiet again in the Russian immensity, except for the sound of ice cracking.

Le Testament builds on themes from Makine's earlier novels, the great turning points of Soviet life: the war, the Stalin era, the "thaws."

In *La Fille d'un héros de l'Union Soviétique* ("The Daughter of a Hero of the Soviet Union"), the "hero," decorated for courage at Stalingrad, will live his life quietly, rarely protesting, rarely angry at his country, giving an annual lecture to schoolchildren, until his wife's heart, weakened by war wounds, gives up in the crush of a food store queue. The daughter will be strong-armed by the KGB into working as an "interpreter" for foreign businessmen. And so prostitution turns out to be a better life than many, for a while.

In *Au temps du fleuve amour*, three boys travel across the Siberian snow, day after day, to see a few Jean-Paul Belmondo movies that have somehow landed in the Red October movie house, situated between the KGB offices and the factory that makes barbed wire for the camps. The boys get older, Belmondo sometimes gets younger. They watch the movies the way they might try to decipher code sent by the West over a crackling transmitter. "We rediscovered the Occident. The world where one could live without worrying about the lugubrious shadows made by the sunny peaks."

Makine's poetic voice, coupled with the matter-of-fact description of a country overgrown with barbed wire, has a curious resonance in the late twentieth-century West. The warmth, and the almost spiritual use of the past, contrast oddly with "postmodern" intellectual and literary debate, which often seems to oscillate between theoretical argumentation and rather naïve attempts to "intervene" in world events.

Although Makine tells his story straightforwardly, without flights into philosophy, the sense of the greater questions of life is always there. And, at the risk of oversimplifying the thinking of this erudite man, it might be said that as a novelist he is in search of spirituality in a world where atom bombs have been "perfected" down to suitcase size.

He believes that the direction of contemporary literature must be "messianic," not religious per se but spiritual. He notes New Age goofiness, the rise of sects, and the vengeful tone of religious revival around the world as painful evidence of a basic human need.

Thus, Makine talks about things that, in our ironic and cynical times, are vaguely embarrassing, certainly old-fashioned. A journalist writing in *Le Monde* said he was very Russian. Another, who admired the book, told me he was so "honest." Many modern writers seem to find it embarrassing to discuss any form of higher feelings—neuroses are O.K., or self-pity, or political indignation of all sorts—but awe, fear of some greater power, or just of a great silence? Anomie is as lively as it gets with this crowd.

Although his writing is never raw, some of the feelings are, and Makine himself says he feels out of place in French apartments where everything is varnished with a coat of elegance and culture, or indeed with the

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notion of culture sold like bread and subsidized by ministries. What he calls Russian "anarchy" is more conducive, he feels, to thought. In French culture, people fall into a kind of intellectual torpor.

Many French intellectuals go on at great length and with imperturbable seriousness about their road from one kind of "militantisme" to another, about what caused them to join the Communist Party or to leave it, as though their voices were part of some important historical record. Most recently, their tortured attempts to be "engaged" on the subject of Bosnia have fallen somewhere between the desperate and the comical.

In contrast, Makine's narrator in *Le Testament* is an old-fashioned boy who becomes entranced by France and spends hours in libraries trying to find out more, who learns poetry by heart and recites it to others; he is in that sense more reminiscent of heroes of nineteenth-century bildungsromans than of the lunatics coming of age in designer clothes in contemporary literature. But he is emphatically a late twentieth-century man.

Makine is interested in what he calls the poetics of nostalgia—not the sort of nostalgia that clutters AM radio here with the greatest hits of the Summmer of Love, but a re-creation of the past that abolishes time. In that sense, he says, Proust is the avant-garde.

The vanquishing of time through artistic memory is the driving theme behind both Proust's well-known story and *The Life of Arseniev*, which was the fictionalized account of Ivan Bunin's youth on his aristocratic family's ruined estate, and of his early forays into the Russian literary world.

Makine has told me:

> All of Bunin, all of Proust: that is nostalgia, but nostalgia is a term that is so overused that is has become an equivalent for *passéisme*, an attachment to the past. On the contrary nostalgia refuses the past, it says that the past is always present. The soul has no notion of death, the body tells us about death, and so we reduce ourselves increasingly to our physical aspect. . . . Some people become matter, others become spirit.

For all his early troubles, Makine is now a star in the business that first scorned him. French publishing is easy to criticize. It is famously insular. Many of the writers who are promoted by the main houses are themselves in the publishing business, and it's difficult not to feel upon looking at some of these books that decision-making was less critical than it might have been.

At the same time, it produces, for its size, an astonishing number of intelligent books of ideas that remain in print and are well distributed. It is also admirably open to the rest of the world. French publishers, like the Germans, publish a large percentage of books in translation (ten or fifteen percent, by my estimate, against about three percent for England or the United States).

American writers are quickly translated and generously reviewed. An example was Paul Auster, who was celebrated in France while hardly known in the United States—but he is an untypical case, as many of his books feel like Nouveau Romans written in English. Less obvious examples are Cormac McCarthy, Richard Ford, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon.

There are many good French writers: interesting novelists, such as J. M. G. Le Clezio, Patrick Modiano, Erik Orsenna, sometimes Philippe Sollers and others; brilliant historians and rhetoricians; and there are plenty of belletrists who write books of limited scope with admirable skill. (These are not unlike many French movies, interesting to people who live here but truly untranslatable.)

No one, however, seems able to match the stature of the writers of the first half of the century. This was made particularly clear with the publication in 1994 of Albert Camus's last, unfinished novel, *Le Premier Homme* ("The First Man"), an autobiographical text that tackled the Algerian question.

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Camus was out of fashion for years, a by-product of his quarrel with Sartre. Now that Sartre is out of fashion, Camus is back in the headlines, partly through the astonishing popularity of this short book fragment, and now through the publication of an important new biography by the journalist Olivier Todd.

Unintentionally comic testimony of the poverty of the last few decades came through the recent publication by Flammarion of *La Putain du diable* ("The Devil's Whore"), a kind of intellectual autobiography by Catherine Clément, philosophy professor, journalist, and for many years a member of the Communist Party, that inevitably was compared to Simone de Beauvoir's *Les Mandarins* and Julia Kristeva's *Les Samouraïs*.

Clement herself compares her book to eighteenth-century philosophical novels, a curious claim since it consists of her fictional conversations on and off the small screen about all the famous people she's known, from Sartre to Lacan. In a flip but self-important tone, she gives us a history of postwar intellectual movements that ignores the best and chatters on glibly about the worst.

Does any of this matter? Artistic creation goes through ice ages, and it is quite conceivable that the second half of the twentieth century will not have much to show off as genius. This is an embarrassing idea for people in the art biz with a vested interest in the idea of the relentless "progress" of art. The art professionals and bureaucrats are famously well established in France—no matter what the government—and they have no intention of giving up what the French call their "fromage."

Le Monde des livres savagely panned a book by the young music critic Benoît Duteurtre that effectively said the government should stop the enormous subsidies to "recherche musicale," that is, to Pierre Boulez's various projects and their offshoots. For this, Duteurtre was compared to Robert Faurisson, the former professor who denies that the Holocaust took place. This severe criticism of an interesting book was published by the same people who devoted enormous space to a book on the faddishly left-wing *Tel Quel* group by Philippe Forest. Amid this kind of dangerous foolishness—and it is by no means uncharacteristic of the intellectual climate here—it seems a small miracle that a book as luminous and unpretentious as *Le Testament français* has been so richly rewarded. Now and then the good guys win.

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Theater

Defects trumpeted as virtues

by Mark Steyn

Unless he has exceptional powers of self-delusion, anyone who writes regularly on the American theater soon grows uncomfortably aware that he's engaged in a kind of ongoing obituary column. That's not metaphorical but literal: these days, the best shows on Broadway are its memorial services, when great actors, writers, producers emerge from involuntary retirement to lay on a spiffy send-off for one more of their ever dwindling ranks. Moreover, even the non-memorial shows wrap themselves in shrouds, as if seeking the ultimate security blanket. *Angels in America* gave us the angel of Death; now, Jonathan Larson's *Rent* gives us the death of Angel.

Angel is, inevitably, an HIV-riddled transvestite sculptor in the East Village, where the drama is set and, indeed, where it's playing (at the New York Theatre Workshop). AIDS has glamorized death to a degree unseen in the arts for a hundred years, but Larson is the first to acknowledge its nineteenth-century antecedents in explicit formal terms. Larry Kramer and the first generation of AIDS chroniclers were concerned to emphasize in unsparing detail the realities of the disease, the sweats and the lesions. But, as its long march through the arts has continued, AIDS has been romantically ennobled to the point where the political and metaphorical burdens it bears can no longer be contained by the dreary naturalism of the (so to speak) "straight" play. So Larson has turned to Puccini: for, like the tubercular heroines of the last century, the person-living-with-AIDS, in defiance of his enfeebled physical condition, must be shown on stage to soar and sing with ravishing beauty. Unintentionally or otherwise, Larson even offers the inverted word order beloved of opera librettists:

> How can you connect in an age
> Where strangers, landlords, lovers
> Your own blood cells betray?

Rent is *La Bohème* translated to the Nineties and into rock opera: aside from transvestite sculptors, there are video artists and lesbian performance artists, all of whom, even the few who don't actually carry the virus, are "living in the shadow of AIDS." But, where Puccini's Mimi was delicate and passive, Larson's Mimi is a tougher cookie, an HIV-positive heroin addict and S&M dancer. (For those *New Criterion* readers who don't frequent downtown bondage bars, I should explain that S&M stands for Sondheim & Madonna, at least in terms of the character's choreographico-musical provenance.) As in the original, Mimi's tiny hand is frozen, though in this instance it's because she needs a fix.

Increasingly in our theater, though, what happens on stage seems merely the play-within-the-play in some broader drama happening all around. *Rent* is a rock opera about dying young, and, a few days before its opening, Larson was found dead in his

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apartment from an aortic aneurysm, achieving a darkly exquisite synthesis of life and art unseen since Gower Champion, the driven director determined to pull off one more hit, died on the opening night of *42nd Street*, the show about the driven director determined to pull off one more hit. Larson was thirty-five, a couple of years younger than George Gershwin at the time *his* career ended. But Gershwin left us a catalogue of songs and concert works and *Of Thee I Sing* and *Porgy and Bess*; Larson was merely "promising," a term that now applies to any theatrical writer up to twenty years older than Gershwin was when he died. I find it hard to tell from *Rent* how promising Larson was. Puccini, regardless of whether he was writing *La Bohème* or *Madam Butterfly*, wrote like Puccini. Larson writes a bit like rock, a bit like soul, a bit like Sondheim, a bit like this, that, and the other from one number to the next, struggling, as pop theater composers have struggled for years, to use the stunted musical vocabulary of the rock era to serve the needs of drama.

But who wants to be Mister Squaresville? In the Sixties, when rock edged into off-Broadway houses and eventually the main stem itself, legit critics smiled indulgently in the manner of elderly benevolent Episcopalian clerics at a black revivalist meeting. *Salvation* is "naughty, of course," wrote *The New York Times*'s Clive Barnes, who back then was hailing new dawns with the urgency of an insomniac cockerel, "but its naughtiness has the impertinence of youth rather than the slime of age." You don't remember *Salvation*? Ah, how soon the slime of age encrusts. When you scrape it off, one show can still be dimly glimpsed, as much a product of its time as *The Earl and the Girl* or *Four Jills and a Jeep*—and, if anything, it's even sillier. *Hair*, you'll remember, introduced Broadway's tired businessmen and matinée ladies to free love, free drugs, and free verse, and, in rushing to hail *Rent* as a breakthrough, many critics recall the impact of its four-letter predecessor. Certainly, the two works share similar obsessions—not least their vehement objection to Brooks Brothers, or even J. C. Penney. *Rent* raises a toast

> To riding your bike midday
> Past the three-piece suits . . .

As cocking snooks go, it lacks even the impertinence of youth. *Rent* reminds me of one of those eighty-year-old Japs they find in the jungles of Borneo who doesn't know the war is over. These guys don't know the war is over, and that they've won. On and on the song proceeds. In its determination to shock us, it's the first number since *Hair* to mention sodomy (that I know of, anyway: you may be better informed, and, if we pool our lists, we might get an off-Broadway compilation show out of it). In this instance, it's the climax of a Porteresque laundry list of downtown pleasures:

> To sodomy
> It's between God and me
> To S&M
> La Vie Bohème.

Well, maybe not *that* Porteresque. Porter's catalogue songs are worldly, at least in the sense that a good proportion of the world puts in an appearance:

> You're a rose!
> You're *Inferno*'s Dante!
> You're the nose
> On the great Durante!

By contrast, Larson's lyrics suffer from tunnel vision:

> To Sontag
> To Sondheim
> To anything taboo . . .

Taboo? Sontag and Sondheim? These are surely the prevailing orthodoxies. Indeed, in the whole play, Larson doesn't produce a single original thought—on sex, AIDS, poverty, American capitalism. The dextrous word play for which he's been praised

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strikes me as technically suspect: "curry vindaloo/ Maya Angelou," like "sodomy/ God and me," is not a dazzling three-syllable rhyme but a weak one-syllable identity ("-loo/ -lou," "-my/ me"). *Hair* was passionately opposed to the Vietnam War, the dull conformity of bespoke menswear and —mostly unintentionally—the structural integrity and craftsmanship of the American theater. It is the latter dilemma that resonates most tellingly through *Rent*: plot, drama, character fly by in broad brush strokes, shrugged off by the sound and fury of the score. So once again, faced with a form that refuses to recognize the requirements of drama, its admirers simply trumpet the defects as virtues. "Now the authors of the dowdy book," wrote Barnes after *Hair* was restyled for Broadway, "have done a very brave thing. They have in effect done away with it altogether." Well, I never. Why didn't Rodgers and Hammerstein think of that? There's the solution to the perennial problem of musicals. Book trouble? Throw the thing out.

The important thing to remember about *Hair* is this: it was a breakthrough—and a dead end. Back in the days of the spirit of '68, in an episode of a tatty British sitcom, a steely spinster schoolmarm tried to get with it by singing a song from the show. She mangled the lyric and, as it turned out, came up with an accurate prophecy: "This is the aging of the dawn of Aquarius . . ." We are all rockers now: the hippie draft-dodgers are middle-aged theatergoers; there's a baby boomer in the White House and, thanks to his $76,000 cut and blow-dry on the runway at Los Angeles, he even briefly restored hair as a political issue. But, if the Age of Aquarius ever dawned, it was all over by lunch time.

Three decades on, even the label seems quaint: "*Rent*—the Rock Opera of the Nineties." Larson's songs don't reveal character so much as advertise it, and, in this staging, the obtrusive lip microphones, emphasizing that these are performers not characters, seem designed to pre-empt any discussion of the show's deficiencies as drama. Old-time musicals wanted to make us feel good; the new school wants to make us feel good about feeling bad. The author isn't helped by a director who keeps bringing the cast downstage to sing anthemically into our faces, as if daring us not to be moved.

Well, I was moved, but not because of the transvestite sculptor or the lesbian performance artist. In Puccini's bohemia and Gower Champion's show-biz fables, the artiness and the show bizziness are merely the specific characteristics of universal characters. *42nd Street*'s myths are central to America's idea of itself: "You're going out there a youngster, but you've got to come back a star!" But there's nothing mythic or emblematic or enlarging about the characters of *Rent*: *La Bohème* is about everyone; *Rent* is about its participants. I was moved by its inability to move us, by its inability to speak to the world beyond. The ravages of AIDS in the theater have obscured a larger death, of theatrical culture and its metaphorical power.

A few days later, an exhaustive study from the National Endowment of the Arts appeared to confirm that diagnosis. The American "highbrow" is "graying"—that's to say, the audience for plays and classical concerts is aging, and not being replenished. Unlike classical concerts and art museums, the theater is not, per se, highbrow. It's high- and low- and middle-, and those proportions have creatively jostled for space throughout its history. In some senses, it's a conduit between high art and pop culture: its best plays have become hit films; its best musicals have spawned hit songs. Perhaps for that reason, unlike museums and concert halls, the theater has never felt the need to make itself "user-friendly," to lure in the indifferent passerby with the promise of a raspberry caramel decaf latte in the coffee shop and a little tasteful cocktail jazz in the foyer. The theater is as user-unfriendly as you can get. That makes its determination, on stage, to be like all the other entertain-

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ment forms all the more perplexing. We have plays that are like films, plays that are like rock concerts, plays that are like sitcoms, plays that have every characteristic of popular culture except one: popularity.

The tragedy of the lively arts is that popular culture became critically respectable at the very point at which it became artistically negligible. Measure for measure, Jerome Kern's modest thirty-two bar form can hold its own, in melodic and harmonic invention, against Schubert. But you can't say the same for the Velvet Underground, never mind Snoop Doggy Dogg. In the theater, as elsewhere, what's happened is the inversion of the middlebrow. Previously, our mainstream dramatists took their cue from high culture: they looked to the classics, great novels, operas. Now they look to movies, sitcoms, pop songs. As operatic adaptations go, just compare Larson's *Rent* with, say, Oscar Hammerstein's *Carmen Jones*. The impertinence of youth has blurred into the slime of age, with the consequence that a large proportion of America's middle-class, middle-aged, middlebrow potential theatergoing audience is locked in a permanent baby-boom immaturity. There's a huge dot-matrix indicator in Times Square showing the ever-swelling numbers worldwide who've seen *Les Misèrables*. Maybe, taking a cue from Brit hit marketing, Broadway could put up a computerized reverse-countdown showing the ever-dwindling numbers of regular playgoers and practitioners.

For real intimations of mortality, if not actually the last rites, you had to be at the Lunt-Fontanne on January 28. Speaking personally, this was the first time I'd ever seen anyone attend their own memorial service. And, by the final curtain (and how sweetly archaic these legit terms now sound), she seemed to have interred an entire theatrical culture in the vault with her.

January 28 was, of course, Super Bowl Sunday, a day when even the effetest artsy ninny gets hit on by cab drivers and news vendors and waitresses and is expected to have an opinion on Dallas over Pittsburgh. The nation's schedule is reorganized to defer to this great TV ritual; the streets are eerily empty and, as you slink along to the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, their silence is accusatory. Whatever small amount of press attention the last performance of *Hello, Dolly!* might normally have merited, its inept choice of closing date had cruelly squandered. The Super Bowl is mass culture, one of that select group of annual rituals that binds the nation together; the theater, on the other hand, is elite, sophisticated, exclusive. No matter that the Super Bowl is a promoters' gimmick cooked up in the late Sixties; that whatever "sport" might once have been involved is now entirely subservient to the needs of television; that the teams are steely business franchises for whom the home-town label is good only until another municipality pitches them a more favorable tax deal; that the players earn so many gazillion dollars a year they'll never have to encounter anyone as lowly as *you* ever again; that the only seats worth having are reserved for a corporate *nomenclatura*; and that Joe Schmoe with his Bud and his pizza slumped in front of the TV has as much chance of getting to the moon as to the Super Bowl. No matter, too, that theater sends its shows out to nowheresville towns that will never see an NFL team, much less the Super Bowl; that its leading players play eight games a week not for millions but for a few thousand, and spend their lives in hotels and dressing-rooms a football star wouldn't hang his spare jockstrap in; that Carol Channing would never be able to afford Johnnie Cochran and F. Lee Bailey for her murder trial; and that, even at the highest level, you can still go to the Times Square ticket booth and buy an orchestra seat for half-price. No matter, none of it: the Super Bowl is mass culture; the theater is elite, exclusive.

Super Bowl, thirty; *Hello, Dolly!*, thirty-two. That's not the final score, but their ages. In 1964, *Hello, Dolly!* was still out there, still part of mass culture. It became the longest-running and highest-grossing

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Broadway show ever; the title song was a Number One record for Louis Armstrong. But, thirty-two years later, by the time the Super Bowl refuseniks gathered in the Lunt-Fontanne for the final performance, *Hello, Dolly!* seemed as shriveled and shrunken as its leading lady. I've never been a fan of either the show or the star and, when this revival came back to Broadway in November, I passed. I'd caught it on the road and found it heavy going, a self-regarding evening in which the audience is intimidated into continuous ovations. Carol Channing is supposedly an indestructible old trouper who's never missed a performance, but it seems to me her act trades with cool calculation on at least its potential destructibility. Once upon a time a star had to get re-elected every night, to prove her stardom right there and then before our eyes. Now the only ones left are like those Presidents-for-Life in ramshackle banana republics. Once, we were roused to our feet because stars were dazzling, wonderful, brilliant; now, they command standing ovations merely for standing. Watch Miss Channing as she descends that famous staircase in the title number: we applaud with relief, as we do when an old nag successfully negotiates a tricky course at a point-to-point. It's not show business but show jumping—and even then, the show steadfastly refuses to jump.

Still, this production got great notices in New York, for drama critics are a sentimental crowd. Producers are always complaining about reviewers "butchering" their shows and irresponsibly endangering the future of legitimate theater. In practice, both groups show considerable unanimity. Both the producers and the critics were on the side of, say, *Swinging on a Star*, a tired, third-rate revue. Unfortunately, the public proved more resistant. It was the same with Miss Channing's "triumphant" comeback. Who needs those NEA statistics when, before your very eyes, a six-year Broadway blockbuster withers away to a sickly three-month revival.

Miss Channing is what theater buffs call "larger than life." "I've never liked that term," Uta Hagen told me a few months back. "What does it mean? *Nothing* is larger than life." Miss Hagen is currently giving one of the truly great theatrical performances of our time in Nicholas Wright's *Mrs. Klein* at the Lucille Lortel: it is as large as life, and full of life. By comparison, Miss Channing substitutes characteristics for character: it's all moves and make-up and mannerisms. The title song is supposedly about Dolly Levi's decision to abandon widowhood and embrace the world again. In practice, she walks through the front door of a restaurant, stands at the top of the stairs and, next thing you know, two dozen waiters are prancing around for twenty minutes. This isn't a dramatic moment, but a moment that seduces the drama away from itself; the number swanks in on a pretext and is its own justification—as long as prancing waiters happen to be your particular bag. Jerry Herman, *Dolly*'s composer, specializes in big ladies descending staircases: in the Sixties, it was *Dolly* and *Mame*; in the Eighties, in *La Cage aux Folles*, the big lady on the staircase turned out to be a guy in a frock. Same set, same song, but recognizing perhaps that Dolly and Mame and all those other caricature broads had been drag queens all along. Not larger than life but simpler than life, crasser than life, and, in the end, smaller than life.

At the Lunt-Fontanne, those who'd seen Carol Channing first time round declared that nothing about her performance had changed. I can well believe it. Trouble is, everything else in the world has changed utterly, leaving Miss Channing like some freakish mutation beached on the sands of time. She is seventy-five now, and, like any cartoonist's caricature, the signature features have overpowered everything else: the wig, the eyelashes, the rouge, the silly maddening squeaky voice from the big cartoon mouth are exactly the same, and from halfway down the orchestra it's hard to see what, if anything, is connecting them up. All stars reflect their audiences: across three

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decades, Carol Channing has become her own female impersonator.

But, as at *Rent*, it was difficult to stay unmoved. Miss Channing appeared bewildered by what had happened. She has no home, she lives in hotels, she's spent three decades touring either in *Dolly* or her only other hit, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. She never made the transition to movies or TV: Marilyn Monroe swiped her first role, and Barbra Streisand her second. And, though she may regret the injustice, she must surely know that, away from grease paint and footlights, in the duller electronic forms, she is merely a grotesque. This season, Julie Andrews and Carol Burnett have been hailed as returning theater stars, but we know (and their box office receipts prove it) that their star power derives mainly from their work elsewhere. Miss Channing was the last pure theater star, and in this competitive season it was an illusion impossible to sustain.

At the curtain call, she promised she'd be back later this year—on tour, not Broadway. And, as we filed out, the exit music added a final taunt:

> Dolly'll never go away!
> Dolly'll never go away!
> Dolly'll never go away . . .

But she has gone away, and she'll never be back.

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Art

Paris as haven: "Explorations in the City of Light"

by Mario Naves

Long before Clement Greenberg dubbed it "the fountainhead of modern art" in 1961, Paris had set the standard by which world art was measured, providing a milieu deep with tradition and often populated by genius. Paris was also a lure for African-American writers, artists, entertainers, and musicians—a fact that had as much to do with race relations in the United States as it did with the cultural and social attractions of Paris. Luminaries such as Josephine Baker, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and a host of jazz and blues musicians found in Paris an environment free from overt racism. It was, to be certain, not a color-blind society or one devoid of irony: the artist Palmer Hayden found that he was treated better by the French when he let it be known that he was an American. Yet Paris provided, as the painter Edward Clark wryly observed, a place where "one was hated as an equal." This may sound like cold comfort, but it was a welcome change for American blacks inured to the indignities encountered at home.

Ever since Henry Ossawa Tanner settled in France in 1891 and enjoyed considerable success as a painter, black American artists have considered Paris an obligatory stage in their development. "Explorations in the City of Light: African-American Artists in Paris, 1945–1965"[1] presents the work of painters and sculptors who went to Paris after the Second World War. Paris was far from a city of light in 1945: food was scarce and amenities few. The city's status as the center of world art was soon to be eclipsed by the accomplishments of the New York School, but Paris's bohemian allure was intact enough to still attract talent from abroad. Seven Americans who made that pilgrimage—Clark, Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaney, Herbert Gentry, Lois Mailou Jones, Larry Potter, and Barbara Chase-Riboud—are featured in "Explorations in the City of Light."

With the exception of Delaney, whose paintings have garnered attention in recent years, none of the artists featured in the exhibition is well known, even in art circles. But they have all created solid bodies of work and pursued not insubstantial careers that, in one way or another, have been spurred by Paris. Unfortunately, the exhibit never suitably shows just *how* Paris affected their art. With the exception of Mailou Jones, whose street scenes and landscapes are French more in subject matter than in style, none of the work on view is distinctly Parisian. The Abstract Expressionist-inspired paintings of Clark and Potter, for

1 "Explorations in the City of Light: African-American Artists in Paris, 1945–1965" opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, on January 18, 1996, and remains on view through June 2. A catalogue of the exhibition, with essays by Catherine Bernard, Peter Selz, Michel Fabre, and Valerie J. Mercer, has been published by the Studio Museum in Harlem (100 pages, $29.95 paper).

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instance, are characteristically American, as is the welded-steel sculpture of Cousins. Gentry's paintings of the Fifties and Sixties have more of the northern European flavor of the Cobra group, and while Chase-Riboud's sculpture owes much to her friend Alberto Giacometti, its pessimism shares a stronger affinity with Britain's Francis Bacon.

To confuse matters further, some of the artists are represented by work done in Paris during the Fifties and Sixties, and by recent work which *may* have been created there. "Explorations in the City of Light" doesn't pretend to be comprehensive, but a bit more focus would have helped. As it is, the viewer is left with the impression that, well, these artists loved Paris a lot. How that love informed their art, however, is left to conjecture.

The first works one encounters when entering the exhibition are Ed Clark's thunderous paintings. With their large scale, strong colors, and gestural paint handling, they all but overshadow the work of Gentry and Chase-Riboud that shares the first floor of the Studio Museum. Clark's canvases are aggressive, proficient, and somewhat predictable—pretty much what one would expect from a second-generation Abstract Expressionist who paints with a push broom. Writing about Richard Diebenkorn's paintings of the 1950s, Jed Perl remarked that, at the time, "de Kooning-type Abstract Expressionism . . . was a dime a dozen." He probably had paintings like Clark's in mind. Yet *Maple Red* (1963)—the closest this show comes to a masterpiece—is anything but a dime a dozen; it's the best painting I've seen in months. Vast swaths of paint, anchored by a granular pink brushstroke acting as a compositional fulcrum, overlap and interlock in an impossibly snappy way. (I'd wager that Clark couldn't believe it himself when he finished the painting.) Imagine a Morris Louis who was less of a control freak, or a Julian Schnabel we could respect. Better yet, imagine that we get a chance to see a more discriminating group of Clark's work in the near future; it could well surprise us.

In comparison to Clark's paintings, Herbert Gentry's expressionism seems quaint, especially the early paintings, which lump together Picasso, Appel, and Pollock with no great distinction. Gentry's recent figurative paintings are colorful and cartoonish, intimating a vitality that is psychological and urban. *Amid the Crowd* (1990–91), with its heap of red and yellow figures and faces, could well be an homage to rush hour in New York City. But Gentry's paintings are stiff, by-the-numbers Neo-Expressionism. Gentry's figures take off from African masks and sculpture but not in any way that gives them life as painting. They are encumbered by uninspired drawing and the artist's inability to create compositions that move the way he wants them to. *Amid the Crowd* is, finally, a pretty static painting. I wonder if Gentry might not be better off painting with oils; the relative inflexibility of acrylics seems to bog him down.

Of all the artists featured in the exhibition, Barbara Chase-Riboud was the last to go to Paris, having arrived there in 1961. Chase-Riboud's recent work is academic neo-Dadaist assemblage of a political bent, the kind of thing that is regularly celebrated at venues like Exit Art. Her bronze sculpture of the early and mid-1960s, however, is accomplished and horrific. They depict deformed and disemboweled figures, often without heads, posed in hieratic postures. *Plant Woman* (1962), a spindly kneeling figure with a cast of an aloe plant sprouting from an orifice where its head should be, is a hellish vision worthy of Hieronymous Bosch. This is visceral sculpture and not easy to take, which, I suppose, is the point. But where does it lead? The talent that went into these pieces is evident, but it is talent in the service of a forbiddingly harsh and narrow world view. The one exception may be *Walking Angel* (1962), an amalgam of vertebrae, legs, and what appears to be a clam shell; it has a hallucinatory authority one associates with myth. Yet I wonder if what

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redeems it is less the sculpture itself than the ghostly halos of light that fall through *Walking Angel* onto the wall behind it.

Whatever else one might say about the work of Clark, Gentry, and Chase-Riboud, it does have presence, and the organizers of the exhibit were shrewd to lead off with it. In contrast, the second-floor galleries of the Studio Museum, taken up with the work of Cousins, Delaney, Jones, and Potter, are anti-climactic. This is due, in part, to the layout of the Studio Museum: the ground-floor galleries are open and spacious, the second-floor galleries squat, the installation flat. But it's also due to the work itself, which has a hard time breaking out of a certain genericism.

Potter's architectural abstractions, for instance, are painted in a manner that is evasive rather than painterly, but his was a career that would never reach maturity for the most final of reasons; he died in 1965 at the age of forty-one. Beauford Delaney lived to be seventy-eight years old, but his gifts as a painter seem never to have coalesced. His paintings, with their dense surfaces and caustic colors, are the work of a portraitist more interested in pure abstraction and an abstract artist who never went all the way. How else to explain Delaney's portraits of James Baldwin and Marian Anderson—formidable personalities both—that convey all the sagacity of a cigar store Indian? Mailou Jones's paintings of France are quizzical and charming, but the only time they come together as painting is in the bulky clusters of houses and foliage seen in the foreground of *Untitled (Spéracédès, Alpes Maritimes, France)* (1951).

The sculpture of Harold Cousins (1916–1992), however, is interesting enough to make one curious about the rest of his work. Cousins is represented by examples from several separate series of sculptures, but all of it feels whole and learned. Anyone familiar with the notion of "drawing in space" will find himself instantly drawn to *Composition* (1951), a sculpture that reads like a three-dimensional transcription of Picasso's *The Kitchen* (1948). It's a sharp, smart piece of sculpture, as are, to a lesser extent, *Bird Torso* (1953) and *Roi des Musiciens* (1955). The two works from Cousins's "Plaiton" series are less intriguing—recalling, as they do, the bland solemnity of much abstract sculpture found in the lobbies of our public buildings—but his two figurative sculptures from the mid-1960s are not without merit. It is odd that so little is known about an artist of such obvious skill. Venturesome art historians and curators could do worse than begin to rectify this situation.

I recently overheard a critic say that if he spent a day visiting galleries or museums and came away having seen only two or three memorable works of art, then he considered it time well spent. This is a mighty thin criterion for judging exhibitions of art, and to say the same about "Explorations in the City of Light" would be to damn it with faint praise. The singular relationship between African-Americans and Paris will, I imagine, require a book to do it justice. Any exhibition that wants to explore the effect Paris has had on African-American artists working there will need a broader historical context and more discerning eye than this one. "Explorations in the City of Light" has too many dead spots for the viewer to gain any insight into its subject. But Clark's *Maple Red*, Cousins's *Composition* and, maybe, Chase-Riboud's *Walking Angel* permit one to say that an hour or two at the Studio Museum for this exhibition is time well spent.

Exhibition notes

"Pergamon: The Telephos Frieze
from the Great Altar"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. January 17–April 14, 1996

It is the relative calm within the great altar complex from the Hellenistic kingdom of Pergamon that pervades the current exhibition at the Met. The masterly carved, fine-grained marble sculptures in the show are all from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,

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which now combines on that city's Museum Island the antiquities collections of former East and West Berlin.

Featured are twelve of the best preserved of fifty-one marble slabs surviving from the carved narrative of the life of Telephos, the mythical founder of Pergamon, which extended along the inner walls of the colonnaded court. The better known relief, depicting over-life-size Olympian gods at war with snake-legged giants—which surrounded the entire altar complex on the exterior and is traditionally considered the watershed of the so-called Hellenistic "high baroque" style—is of only contextual importance here. It is represented by a few fragments. The Met's addition of their plaster cast of a giant's head and torso is a somewhat jarring note in a room full of light-reflecting marbles of high quality, but it does suggest the scale of the Gigantomachy.

Newly cleaned and restored in Berlin with the financial help of the two participating American museums, the dozen Telephos blocks form a more or less harmonious group, though they are by many hands and vary considerably in state of preservation and degree of finish. A time-honored Greek theme, the Gigantomachy is an implicit allegory of the Greek defense of (Greek) civilization, and in this case alludes to the Pergamine Attalid dynasty's frequent victories over the marauding Gauls. The Telephos frieze was a visual confirmation of the Attalids' Greek heritage. While parts of its narrative are found in literature and art predating the frieze, the story must have been recast in a Pergamine court epic before or contemporary to its carving in the second century B.C. Sections of the frieze—which is continuous but divided into episodes of action with the orientation of a figure often marking the beginning of a new scene—are unattested elsewhere, and details differ in meaningful ways.

There is a great deal of virtuoso high relief here—arms and legs, as well as various details are often carved free of the block—as well as deep carving for linear outline and emphasis of volume. Dowel holes indicate the addition of carved marble pieces to the surface in places. In general the style is classicizing and elegant, notably in the figures of slender, sweet-faced young Greeks whose small heads enhance their height. Outdoor contexts are supplied with carefully articulated landscape: oak trees in the grove in Arcadia where Telephos is conceived through the union of a local princess and Herakles, ancestor also of Alexander the Great; a plane tree on Mount Parthenion where he is suckled by a lioness. Meticulously carved bed legs indicate interior scenes. These contexts were further enhanced in detail by painting, or at least were intended to be. As the carving of the frieze was not completely finished, it may never have been painted.

The Telephos frieze is set in its own Pergamine context within a small group of well-chosen and beautifully carved marbles from both the altar complex and wider Pergamon. There is a remarkable scale model of the altar complex, also sent from Berlin, and some fine coins of the Attalid and other Hellenistic dynasties lent by the American Numismatic Society in New York. Architectural elements from the altar are carved with exquisitely detailed ornament: look for the thunderbolt of Zeus. The marble head of a sensuously full-faced young man with the parted lips and the deeply set eyes characteristic of earlier Hellenistic faces, his hair carved to receive a metal diadem or garland, surpasses in sheer beauty the better-known monumental head of Attalos I, also here.

Organized by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung-Preussischer Kulturbesitz, the exhibition will be shown at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor from May 4 to September 8, 1996. The first volume of a catalogue, edited by Renée Dreyfus and Ellen Schraudolph, has been published by the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (120 pages, $19.95 paper).

—Beryl Barr-Sharrar

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"Poussin: Works on Paper,
Drawings from the Collection of
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II"
at the Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York. February 6–March 31, 1996

Although Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) is widely regarded as the father of French classicism, he spent almost all of his mature career in Rome. Born in Normandy, Poussin went via Venice to the Eternal City in 1624. He remained there except for an unhappy two-year interlude in Paris, from 1640 to 1642, when he served as *premier peintre du roi* under Louis XIII, executing commissions for Cardinal Richelieu and undertaking the decoration of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre.

This small but sumptuous exhibition of drawings from Windsor Castle is the last stop on a tour that began at the Dulwich Picture Gallery in London last year and has included stops at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The sixty-five works (including some double-sided sheets) traverse most of Poussin's career, beginning with some fledgling efforts completed in Paris in the early 1620s and going through 1650. In addition to desultory drawings on mythological themes, the exhibition includes preparatory sketches for a number of Poussin's greatest masterpieces, including the Met's own *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1633–34), the *Triumph of Pan* and *Triumph of Bacchus* (both mid-1630s), and the second set of *Sacraments* Poussin painted in the 1640s, a magnificent series that is on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Scotland.

Poussin must surely have done his share of life studies; but—until recently—none had been identified among his drawings. Instead, he tended to base his figure drawings on wax figurines that he posed with elaborate staging and lighting. Accordingly, the organizers of this exhibition have trumpeted the discovery of a life study that was found *verso* when a drawing was lifted off its antique mount. As it happens, the work in question—a faint chalk drawing featuring a pair of legs—is mostly of academic interest. More compelling in this exhibition is the revelation of Poussin's artistic development, from a Venetian, Titianesque voluptuousness to the sober, history-drenched classicism whose tutelary spirit was Raphael.

As Martin Clayton, Assistant Curator of the Print Room at Windsor Castle, notes in his introduction to the catalogue, Poussin was not especially gifted as a draftsman. Indeed, one can discern certain clumsinesses in his drawings, especially in those done before his move to Rome. And although Poussin rapidly gained confidence in the late 1620s and early 1630s, a growing tremor, probably brought on by the effects of syphilis, required that he resort to various expediencies—short, rapid hatching instead of long, flowing lines. Which brings us to the question of what makes Poussin's drawings so remarkable. None of them display the elaborate finish of a presentation study; few show much in the way of technical virtuosity. Yet the best of them—a partial list includes *Perseus and Andromeda: The Origin of Coral*, *The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne*, *The Saving of the Infant Pyrrhus*, *Medea Killing Her Children*, as well as some of the studies for *The Rape of the Sabine Women*—are alive with the drama of human emotion. Poussin's great gift in this respect was his mastery of composition. His most affecting drawings, like most of his great paintings, are carefully staged tableaux in which extremities of human emotion are caught in the sharp, time-stopping light of contemplation. The action is not so much frozen as distilled: the entire episode swept up into a single trembling moment of unstoppable clarity.

A catalogue of the exhibition, written by Martin Clayton, has been published by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in association with Merrell Holberton (208 pages, $35 paper).

—*Roger Kimball*

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The media

The press's naïve cynicism

by James Bowman

One thing about an election year that is becoming as predictable as politicians' hand-shaking and baby-kissing is the press's orgy of self-criticism. The latest in a long line of journalists being critical of their own profession is James Fallows in his new book called *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy*. Fallows's is a serious book, though I think it profoundly wrong-headed. But it has been interesting to observe the eagerness, even alacrity, with which his journalistic colleagues have rushed to accept his thesis and to accuse themselves, sometimes in the strongest terms, of "cynicism." Why is it that media people just *love* sitting through boring discussion programs or going to endless seminars about how naughty and "cynical" they are? I think it is because their "cynicism" is remarkably naïve.

For years, conservatives have accused the press of liberal biases only to be answered with furious and suspiciously loud denials. The latest example occurred when a CBS News correspondent, Bernard Goldberg, wrote an Op-Ed piece for *The Wall Street Journal* about an instance of blatant bias by his colleague and "long time friend" [*sic*] at CBS, Eric Engberg. In a "Reality Check" segment about the flat tax, Engberg had carefully created the impression that no reasonable person could possibly believe in the virtues claimed for it by its Republican proponents. Yet when Goldberg ventured to suggest that this might be an example of narrow or one-sided reporting, the CBS News people lashed out at him. Bob Schieffer, the network's chief Washington correspondent, said: "People are just stunned. It's such a wacky charge, and a weird way to go about it. . . . I don't know what Bernie was driving at. It just sounds bizarre."

It doesn't occur to him that it might be a good idea to find out what Bernie was driving at. Yet when the charge against journalists is not bias but "cynicism," they can't move fast enough to accept the blame and chant in chorus: *mea culpa*. Part of the reason is that, if you set yourself up as being above all things fair and unbiased, you will always welcome an opportunity to demonstrate your capacity for harmless self-criticism. And the stigma of "cynicism" is about as harmless as you can get. All it means is that you have gone a little too far, been a bit overzealous in doing what everyone agrees a good journalist must do, which is to question authority. Criticizing themselves for "cynicism" in fact negates the charge while making them feel even better about themselves than they already do.

Which is what, instead of cynicism, they ought to be criticizing themselves for. In other words, the eagerness of journalists to embrace the charge of "cynicism" demonstrates that their real sin is not cynicism at all but self-righteousness. You see the same thing at work in the ostensible self-criticism of Hollywood in a film such as *The Player*.

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On the surface it is about the shallowness, the ruthlessness, and, yes, the cynicism of the movie industry. But just beneath the surface it is saying, "Aren't we awful? Aren't you impressed?" Being outrageous in these ways is precisely what they love about themselves, just as being "cynical" is what the press loves about itself. Almost as much as it loves itself for being self-critical (and thus fair-minded). So, far from being too cynical, the media is not nearly cynical enough. Or rather, its cynicism is not about the conduct and motives of politicians, which might provide a useful service to the public, but about the public, which instead provides a useful service to politicians.

Consider for example, Tom Shales's review in *The Washington Post* of President Clinton's State of the Union address. Media critics of the Fallows type would no doubt concentrate on the fact that it was presented as a review in the first place, as if the speech were a piece of theater. But it *is* a piece of theater! Why be mealy-mouthed about reviewing it? What is regrettable is that the review is so superficial—like a review of a play that confines itself to the subject of the sets and costumes. To the media, apparently, being sophisticated means that you are allowed to adopt a position of complete moral detachment from its manipulation of appearances. Clinton's speech, wrote Shales,

> was blandly written, too long and heavy on gimmicks. But, fortunately for him, Bill Clinton looked very good delivering it. His third State of the Union speech, live on all the networks last night, would make dull reading but made good viewing. It seemed a strong kickoff to his reelection campaign.
>
> Clinton appeared robust, youthful and forceful, qualities people like in a leader, and delivered the speech with virtual flawlessness. . . . There were some brilliant touches by Clinton. About 10 minutes into the speech he delivered what was arguably its most emotional punch, saluting his embattled wife, Hillary, who sat in the gallery. He called her "a wonderful wife, a magnificent mother and a great first lady" and said, his eyes moist, "Thank you, Hillary."
>
> Unfortunately, she returned his beaming and loving look with a rather chilly gaze. But his gesture was gallant and touching. It had the appearance of being damn fine behavior.

I wonder if Shales stopped to consider whether Mrs. Clinton's "chilly gaze" might have been a judgment on the sincerity and authenticity of the "gallant" gesture? Seemingly not. He is unwilling to be so "cynical" and to ask himself what is the reality behind the smoothly-managed appearances of the Clinton speech. But then, perhaps the *Post*'s TV critic reckons the President is entitled to a willing suspension of disbelief. At any rate, he concludes by saying: "The presentation was terrific. And with television, presentation is content, so it's hard to imagine that this Clinton speech won't go down in the record books as a winner."

"With television, presentation is content." Yes, but the same is not true with politics, and to treat political television as just another form of television betokens a deeper cynicism than any that Fallows—or any of the other critics of media "cynicism" such as Thomas Patterson or Kathleen Hall Jamieson—have ever imagined. Shales is a natural, unthinking player in that favorite beltway game of looking wise in judging what will appeal to the rubes outside Washington. That is to say, *he* knows that the presidential performance was all for show, but he is far too sophisticated an observer to say anything so obvious. Instead, he strokes his chin and opines, in effect, "Yes, this will appeal to the suckers. They'll fall for this one, all right." This is doubly cynical. It is cynical in taking it for granted that the President is not sincere, and it is cynical in assuming that no one but sophisticates like himself will notice. But is it more cynical than the President, who obviously assumed that the press would not care about the content of his speech?

Even conservatives are admiring of Clinton's kind of cynicism. Paul Gigot, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, claimed that

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"Audacity is an underappreciated skill in politics, and this president has more of it than anyone in memory." But is his "audacity" the same thing that Marshal Foch meant in recommending to generals "l'audace, toujours l'audace"? Clearly, Gigot means something less like military boldness than like social "cheek" or "chutzpah." And how audacious is that? The most striking thing about Bill Clinton's chutzpah—which presumably even his supporters would not deny him—is how easily he gets away with it. So in fact, it is not very bold or audacious at all. No one—or no one he has to worry about—ever says to him, "Come off it, Bill, that's a barefaced lie" or "a shameless example of hypocrisy."

Always there are those who are ready to check the general position of *tout le monde* that the man is without scruple, and so he can afford—easily—to be shamelessly without scruple. Thus it is not enough for Clinton just to say that "the era of big government is over." In a follow-up interview with Ann Devroy and John F. Harris of *The Washington Post*, the President claimed that this extraordinary assertion "was not a departure from the philosophy he brought to the White House three years ago." Well, I suppose you can't depart from something that never existed, but for him to say, as he went on to do, that "he has compiled a record of 'remarkable consistency' " in office and not to provoke instant and uncontrolled hilarity in his interlocutors is one measure of how little disposed towards cynicism about the President's words and actions the press is.

On the contrary, it is all they can do to notice that there might be some trifling discrepancies between what Clinton says today and what he has said in the past. Todd S. Purdum wrote in *The New York Times* that in both last year's critically panned and this year's critically praised speeches the President "called for overhauling welfare and campaign finance laws, consolidating Federal job training programs, restoring civility and cracking down on teenage pregnancy and violence in the media, often in nearly the same words." Now, he went on, the words sound better because of Clinton's revived political prospects. "Yet the President's very repetition also shows the limits of his power. He recited his agenda for the umpteenth time in part because so much of it remains unachieved at the hands of hostile Congresses (Republican *and* Democratic)."

So *that's* who's responsible for all those teenage pregnancies! Those rascals in Congress! Purdum, in the received journalistic fashion, takes us behind the scenes to suggest certain political realities that may have moved the President to speak as he did, but they are only the political realities that are sympathetic to Clinton. He does not even notice the weirdly Republican cast to the speech except in a quotation from Theodore Sorenson, who told him that "Mr. Clinton's deftest trick was to borrow Republican notions on crime and values, then embrace them with his own caveats so as to make them his own. It made it clear that the Clinton position was not a difference in objective or principle so much as it was a difference in methods and means," Mr. Sorenson continued, "and the public's increasingly coming around to his point of view."

At least the journalists are coming around to it! But that the inconsistency, the gap between rhetoric and reality, might have been anything but clever political strategy was hardly even suggested by the supposedly "cynical press." Instead, there was quite a lot of cheerleading. Mary McGrory in *The Washington Post*, for example, called the speech "dazzling" and said Bob Dole "fell on his face" in responding: "His speech was out of the Cold War era, bristling with barbs about liberals and elitists—in the face of a general electorate that is pleading for comity and civility." Is it possible that this opinion about what the "general electorate" is pleading for has something to do with Miss McGrory's own political views? Surely not. It would be cynical to suggest such a thing.

But Miss McGrory herself is not above a

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little cynicism of a different kind when she takes us behind the scenes and assesses Dole's speech as a piece of theater: it simply had not been so well-orchestrated as the President's. "Where was the expert on theater? Did someone else decide that he should look as haggard as possible? Did anyone suggest to him a nap before he went on, so he could compete with Clinton's glow?" Is it possible that that "glow" could have been imparted by the viewer? Funny, isn't it, how Miss McGrory's "cynicism" in treating politics as theater, always ends up as a critical rave for the Clintons, a critical slating for the GOP. About Mrs. Clinton she writes: "Her performance ranked with her husband's when she trod the road to Calvary at the courthouse. She went in the front door, spoke graciously into the thicket of microphones both coming and going and said she had come to help the grand jury." *The road to Calvary*? Now *there's* cynicism for you!

But what about that extraordinary statement that "the era of big government is over"? Would it be necessarily cynical to point out that this is not exactly a point of view that we have come to associate either with Mr. Clinton or with his Democratic Party? Or is it, perhaps, even more cynical not to mention it at all, as the pro-Clinton media generally did not? After all, they must have thought, that's just political boilerplate: he doesn't really mean it. In this case, you might think that the cynic would agree with the liberal cheerleaders, but the other side was generally not so cynical as that. The editorial in *The Weekly Standard* shouted: "We Win." But here was a case where the usual procedure was simply reversed: conservatives wanted to believe in Clinton's sincerity, the liberals in his insincerity. But either way, journalists on both sides are nowhere *near* cynical enough to catch on that it is they and not the voters who are being suckered.

Matthew Cooper in *The New Republic*, for example, quotes that model of judicious non-cynicism, George Stephanopoulos, to

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the effect that the speech was "a classically Third Way speech." And what said the cynical journalist to this? He asked: "Was it?" Hmm. Well, yes it more or less was. The trouble was that that Third Way represented "the end of Clintonism." Clintonism? Stop me if I'm wrong, but has anybody *ever* suggested that Bill Clinton was enough of an ideologue to have an ism named after him? Well, if it hasn't happened before, Matthew Cooper is going to put the deficiency right. "Clinton has, of course, been reviled as hollow, unprincipled. Much of that accusation stands up . . . and yet. There has been at the heart of Clinton a real ideology that was about more than polls and pragmatism. Clintonism, the ideology, was bult on ideas about the way the world worked—some convincing, others not, but ideas nonetheless."

And what were these ideas? Well, there was "Rule One," says Cooper: *viz* that "training and education are central to American prosperity." Is that an idea or a truism? Well, it will have to do as an idea, since Cooper can't think of any others. The demise of Clinton the ideologue, unnoticed by anyone else, is at least mourned by Mr. Cooper, though he finds some considerable consolation in the fact that, in dismissing his ideological alter ego, Clinton was in a deeper sense "true to himself" since "the appeal to common ground has been a staple of Clintonism from Little Rock days."

So "Clintonism," we discover, consists of telling people about the importance of "training and education" to America's future and appealing to his opponents to meet on "common ground." It is entirely rhetorical. That Clinton could simultaneously be "appealing to" that common ground and refusing to compromise on his rejection of the Republican budget proposals is a fact that has no relevance to Cooper. Is this what Fallows would call "cynical"? It's true that he notes that "common ground can't be ordered like room service" and that Clinton's avoiding of such contentious issues as affirmative action suggested his speech was "poll driven," but to a true cynic, these caveats would be the most obvious of truths and only door-openers to a world of interpretation and suggestion about the true political motives for Clinton's rhetorical (if not practical) attachment to "civility."

Yet Cooper, too, is Fallows's kind of "cynic" because he, in common with every other commentator, grades Clinton's performance as a performance. And, like nearly every other commentator, he marks Clinton high, Dole and the Republicans low. They, Cooper says, "looked petulant, irritable. Someone needs to tell Gingrich to wear makeup. Someone needs to tell Dole to wear less. Puffy and stubbly, the Speaker looked far heavier than the president, who is often lampooned for his weight." What strikes one about this kind of "cynicism," actually, is its naïveté. Cooper was one of many who mentioned Dole's poor appearance but who never even considered, as a *really* devious cynic would have done, the possibility that looking haggard and overworked might actually be an advantage vis-à-vis the sleek and polished President.

Charles Paul Freund pointed out in *The Washington Post* how Bob Dole and a few supporters attempted to deal with criticism of his response to the State of the Union address by stressing the content of his message. "But even they must have realized the futility of such a defense: Visual response—intense, intimate and ultimately emotional—outraces and overpowers intellectual response, a political given since candidates and the electorate were thrust into one another's faces by modern communications." He reaches the categorical conclusion that "since 1932 and the rise of sound newsreels, the more visually aloof candidate in every presidential election has also been the also-ran, Nixon's 1968 victory being a special case of successful artificiality."

Freund's larger point is that it is not necessarily a bad thing that "we make our politics of our pictures," since this allows us to see for ourselves that the candidates are not "imbeciles, criminals, drunkards, and lunatics" as they were routinely charged

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with being in the days before TV and newsreels. And it is this which suggests that the answer to Fallows and his fellow media critics is that what they are objecting to is not the cynicism of the press but a combination of the emptiness of political rhetoric (which the press is too seldom disposed to point out) and the media sophistication of ordinary people. The press cannot fail to be aware that the public is aware of what the press (and the media people in political campaigns) are doing, and so they take that into account in their reporting. Wishing this sophistication away is to wish the genie back in the bottle or the toothpaste back in the tube—or the vomit back in the stomach. Media critics too often have *no idea* how near the media critics among the laity have come to overtaking them.

The reason for their moaning then about how unfortunate is the media's "cynicism" is to demonstrate their own sophistication and to deprecate the charge of cynicism at one and the same time. Christopher Hitchens, a man of the Left, noticed the same thing in his review of the novel *Primary Colors* by "Anonymous" in *The New York Review of Books*:

> A permanent subtext. . . concerns the role of the press and media. "Anonymous" takes the view that the "scorps" or scorpions of the Fourth Estate are forever on a blood-in-the-water alert. This opinion, very common in the political class, ministers to its mirror-image among the press corps, which is always ready, with a shy self-deprecating grin, to confess that if it has a fault it is an excess of the "adversarial" gene. Such poppycock, which is in reality no more than an exercise in mutual self regard, has its usefulness for both parties. The politicians can claim to be held to an impossible standard (which they never are) and the pundits can hold seminars of introspection about whether they have gone too far (which they never do).

About this, Hitchens is certainly right. Polling data from the Times Mirror Center Press Survey published last spring reveal that the media's opinion of politicians and political institutions is uniformly higher than the public's. Yet press and public largely agree that "The press is too cynical" is a valid criticism.

Well, what can you expect? Both have been told it often enough. But perhaps I am being too cynical! In the same survey, journalists themselves hold by fifty-four to forty-four percent that they are more cynical than other people. The public disagrees, voting forty-five to forty-nine percent that journalists are no more cynical than they are. Perhaps the truth is that everyone now supposes himself more cynical than his neighbor, just as he used to suppose himself more honest. The press only reflects a larger and more sinister reality than the trivial issue of its own "cynicism": it is that the real problem with our public discourse is the value we as a society (or at least as a media culture, consisting of both consumers and producers) attribute to being knowing rather than being honest. This social valuation, of course, is not the same thing as being either knowing or honest, but it is more likely to lead to a facile knowingness than to anything toward which we might feel more welcoming in our political life.

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Books

Stealing history

by Donald Kagan

The publication by Martin Bernal in 1987 and 1991 of the two volumes of *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* gave widespread attention to a series of claims about the relationship between ancient Greek civilization and, therefore, of the Western Civilization that sprang from it, and that of ancient Egypt. Bernal was not trained as a classical scholar nor as a historian of the ancient world, but his position as a professor at Cornell University and his two volumes, packed with footnotes and intricate arguments, lent a respectability to a set of assertions and an interpretation of the past that had previously been ignored almost entirely. These claims include, among other notions, that the people who developed and lived in the ancient Egyptian civilization were black Africans and that the Athenian Socrates and the Macedonian Cleopatra descended from black African ancestors. Some writers assert that Egyptians invaded Greece in the sixteenth century B.C., taught the Greeks agriculture and metallurgy, and in other ways directly and powerfully influenced Greek civilization. There are also claims that the Greek philosophers Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, and Plato studied with Egyptian masters and that Aristotle accompanied Alexander the Great to Alexandria in 333 B.C., looted the great library there, using the collection as the foundation of his entire system of philosophy and science. All of this is seen not as cultural influence but as the theft of a "stolen legacy" whose traces have been carefully obliterated by subsequent generations of white Europeans.

It would be easy to dismiss these claims as self-evidently or demonstrably erroneous claptrap, the product not of a serious and honest search for historical truth but of a current cultural and political agenda, but Professor Mary Lefkowitz, a distinguished classical scholar at Wellesley College, is right to take them seriously in her new book, *Not Out of Africa*.[1] They are put forward seriously on campuses all over the country both in public lectures and in the regular curricula of classes for credit. As part of Afrocentric programs of study some of them have found their way into the public schools. Few of the students and audiences exposed to such notions have the training to see through or even to pose intelligent questions about what they hear, so there is ample reason for Professor Lefkowitz to undertake her task, which she carries out with clarity and scholarly elegance.

She cites the work of Professor Frank Snowden, emeritus professor at Howard University, and long the leading authority on blacks in antiquity, who has clearly shown that the ancient Egyptians, like most Africans north of the Sahara, were not black.

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1 *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History*, by Mary Lefkowitz; Basic Books, 222 pages, $24.

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The case for an Egyptian invasion of Greece during the Bronze Age, she points out, requires us to treat Greek myths as if they were historical facts and then to make a tendentious selection from among them and finally to distort them to reach the desired conclusion. It also rests on childishly false etymologies and is unsupported by either the archeological record or reliable evidence in Egyptian or Greek sources.

Professor Lefkowitz reminds us that Cleopatra was of Macedonian Greek descent, part of a dynasty that practiced inbreeding beyond the point of incest (she herself married her own brother). The sole reason for thinking she might have a black ancestor is our ignorance of the origins of her paternal grandmother, the mistress of Ptolemy IX; in this absence of evidence seekers for Cleopatra's alleged black African origins find what they are after. Professor Lefkowitz characterizes their arguments as follows:

> Because we know nothing about Cleopatra's grandmother, it is possible to conjecture that her identity was deliberately concealed. In the absence of any information about the reasons for the concealment, it is possible to hypothesize that the facts about her identity were suppressed because she was black, just as some people nowadays refuse to acknowledge their black ancestors. Therefore (to follow this line of argument to its logical conclusion), even though her portraits show her to have no characteristically African features, it becomes possible to conclude that she was black. The argument can then be judged to be successful because it is *culturally* plausible. No one seems to have pointed out that a generation ago, it would have been possible to argue on the same grounds that Cleopatra was Jewish.

One argument for Socrates' alleged African origins amounts to something like this: to be sure, there is no ancient testimony saying that Socrates had African ancestors, but neither is there any that says he didn't, so he might have. Another arises from his appearance, which was compared by contemporaries with that of a silenus, an imaginary creature like a bearded man with the tail and ears of a horse. Sculptures made after his death show him with a snub nose, wide nostrils, and a broad mouth, features that also appear on a vase painting of an Ethiopian from the fourth century B.C., as well as on that of a white satyr (a creature portrayed as having a man's body, pointed ears, goat's legs, and a horse's tail). These are said to argue for an African ancestry for Socrates. Professor Lefkowitz points out that Socrates' students joked only that he had a flat nose and was bald. Greek vase paintings display such features not only on Ethiopians but also on white-skinned Scythians from southern Russia. Seleni and satyrs were also usually depicted as having the same skin color as other Greek males.

> Saying that Socrates looks like a silenus means that Socrates looks like a silenus, not like an African. If we were to use his resemblance to a silenus as an indication of his origins, it would clearly be equally logical to infer that he was descended from bearded men with horse's ears and tails.

The story of Aristotle's theft of Egyptian learning from the library at Alexandria is the most entertaining of all these fantasies. There is no evidence whatever that Aristotle visited Egypt, not to mention Alexandria. Had he done so, he could not have visited the library, which was assembled only in 297 B.C., twenty-five years after his death. Had his spirit visited the new center of learning it could not have discovered the secrets of Egyptian learning and philosophy since the library at Alexandria was devoted almost entirely to works in Greek, written by Greeks, especially to the canon of classic works since Homer and to learned commentaries on them.

Professor Lefkowitz goes beyond the easy explosion of such fictions to trace the route by which they came into being. Two ancient writers, in particular, have been the sources of assertions of Egyptian origins of Greek ideas: Herodotus, who lived in the fifth

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century B.C., and Diodorus of Sicily, four centuries later. They neither spoke the Egyptian language nor could read its scripts but were dependent for what they report on what was told them by Egyptian informants. Like many other Greeks they had great respect for the antiquity of Egyptian civilization and liked to seek the roots of Greek ideas and customs in it. The Egyptian informants, for their part, were eager to claim origins in their own culture for Greek achievements, for the days of Egypt's imperial greatness were long in the past. In Herodotus's day, Egypt was a province of the Persian Empire; in the time of Diodorus and later Greek writers it was a part of the Roman Empire. The chief remaining source of national pride was the antiquity and superiority of Egyptian history and culture. Over time they claimed, as reported in Greek sources, that Egyptian wisdom had instructed such Greek thinkers as Homer, Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, Eudoxus, and Plato. The decipherment of ancient Egyptian writing in the last century has made it possible for us to read thousands of documents that reveal a civilization and way of thinking that could hardly be more different from that of the Greeks and could not possibly serve as a basis or a model for the ideas of the listed Greek thinkers.

Herodotus and Diodorus, as well as the other ancient writers who speak of Egypt, knew nothing of any of this but relied on what they were told. Professor Lefkowitz ingeniously explains why their Egyptian informants made their implausible claims by drawing our attention to similar claims made by the ancient Jews and Christians.

The Jews who lived in Alexandria in the centuries after its foundation sought to show that, although they were ruled by the Greeks, Jewish writings and teachers had inspired much of Greek culture. They claimed that the mythical Greek singer Musaeus was really Moses. Aristobulus, an Alexandrian Jew of the second century B.C., wrote verses that he attributed to such famous Greek writers as Sophocles, showing them to believe in a single male God such as that of the Jews. He asserted that Pythagoras, Socrates, and Plato had studied the books of Moses and believed that the world was sustained by the God of the Hebrews. He claimed that "Plato followed our system of law, and clearly worked out every detail in it."

To explain how Plato was able to learn from these Hebrew writings, Aristobulus said he used a Greek translation of the Bible—several centuries before the first known Greek translation. Later, Christian church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria (circa A.D. 260–340), locked in a struggle with the predominantly Greek pagan culture, took a harder line. Clement claimed not merely that Greek culture was borrowed but that it was stolen. "They not only stole their religious doctrines from the barbarians, but they also imitated our [that is, Jewish] doctrines." As Professor Lefkowitz says, these claims by Jews and Christians help us understand why Egyptians were eager to tell visiting Greeks that the greatest Greek thinkers depended on Egyptian instruction.

> It was a way of asserting the importance of their culture, especially in a time when they had little or no political powers. The Greeks were willing to listen to what they were told because of their respect for the antiquity of Egyptian religion and civilization, and a desire somehow to be connected with it. But as we have seen, there is no reason to believe that Greeks derived their philosophy or learning from Egypt, despite their great (and wholly justified respect) for Egyptian piety and knowledge.

The story of how the myth of a Greek appropriation of Egyptian philosophy reached the twentieth century is more curious. At the base of the modern version is the assumption that from early times there was such a thing as an "Egyptian Mystery System," which is what is supposed to have led the Greeks to come to Egypt to study and which they stole and presented as

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Greek philosophy. For this there is no acceptable evidence. Professor Lefkowitz demonstrates that the ancient crumbs from which this notion derives are either works that are not philosophical or works of Greek philosophy written by Greeks. They used a genre in which they hoped to gain greater respect for their ideas by pretending that they themselves were Egyptian mysteries. These works came to the attention of Western Europeans during the Renaissance. Their message was taken literally, and from them was created a picture of what Professor Lefkowitz calls "Mystical Egypt" (as opposed to the historical Egypt that has only come to light since the excavations and translation of real Egyptian writings in the nineteenth century), which won considerable attention and respect.

The greatest influence of this invented Egypt came through its adoption in the eighteenth century by the Freemasons. Their version assumed not only the existence of an Egyptian Mystery System but one that was connected to a great system of moral education. The source for these notions was entirely fictional, a three-volume novel called *Sethos, a History or Biography, based on Unpublished Memoirs of Ancient Egypt*, published in 1731 by a French priest, the Abbé Jean Terrasson. Following the ancient convention, the author pretends to be translating an unknown manuscript written by an unknown Greek of the second century A.D. Ostensibly describing the Egypt of the thirteenth century B.C., Terrasson depicts a world of advanced science, technology, art, law, and educational institutions such as would delight the imagination of a forward-looking eighteenth-century European gentleman. Access to it requires the comprehension of a complex system of mysteries prepared for by study, moral purification, and entered by means of a mystical initiation ceremony.

Father Terrasson's novel became very popular and powerfully shaped the beliefs, practices, and rituals of the Masonic movement, whose reliance on a mythical, mystical, Egyptian tradition is perhaps most widely known in its depiction by Mozart in his *Magic Flute*. This picture of ancient Egypt was soon forgotten by everyone else and, before long, totally discredited by the discoveries of scientific Egyptology. It remained, however, the one preserved among the Masons, and it was from black Masons that the claim arose that not only had the Greeks learned their philosophy, they had stolen it from the Egyptians, who were black Africans, and deliberately attempted to conceal the theft.

During the nineteenth century, black American writers claimed that the ancient Egyptians were black and took pride in the belief that their ancestors had built the pyramids, "that this race of black men . . . is the very race to which we owe our arts, sciences, and even the use of speech." The idea was adopted by the black Masons, one of whom wrote as follows:

> When the ancestors of the present haughty Saxons—the Gauls, the Normans, and the Celts—were naked barbarians, living in grottoes and dropping [*sic*] caves, slinging stones at wild animals for food, and eating that food uncooked, there was on Africa's soil, in Egypt, the land of the black man, a civilization resting on the "pinnacle of national splendor" far exceeding that of Greece or Rome today. On the great Oasis in the desert of antiquity blossomed the golden deeds of the world's first Masonry. Here mind was the standard of the man, and natural ability ranked above birth. Every woman was educated. . . . Here the landmarks of Masonry were born.

This vision deeply influenced Marcus Mosiah Garvey, the important black separatist leader of the first part of the twentieth century. Garvey was at one time a Mason, and his Universal Negro Improvement Association's organization, regalia, and practices resembled the Masons' in many ways. He also accepted the Masons' myth of an Egyptian civilization that was the root of classical civilization in Greece and Rome, but added two elements: that

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the ancient Egyptians were black Africans and that their legacy to the Greeks was not the consequence of influence but of theft.

> Every student of history, of impartial mind, knows that the Negro ruled the world, when white men were savages and barbarians living in caves; that thousands of Negro professors at that time taught in the universities in Alexandria, then the seat of learning; that ancient Egypt gave to the world civilization and that Greece and Rome have robbed Egypt of her arts and letters, and taken all the credit to themselves. It is not surprising, however, that white men should resort to every means to keep Negroes in ignorance of their history, it would be a great shock to their pride to admit to the world today that 3,000 years ago black men excelled in government and were the founders and teachers of art, science and literature.

It remained for later writers only to spell out in imaginary accounts that range from the implausible to the impossible just how the theft took place.

Professor Lefkowitz tells this story in a calm and scholarly way, taking the most absurd assertions seriously and taking the trouble to lay out the evidence and reasoned argument to refute them. This is a great service and will help introduce careful learning and cool, sound judgment to a subject that has up to now badly lacked such things. But why was she willing to spend her time, energy, and intelligence to demonstrate the emptiness of an argument that is so obviously unsound? The task must have been far less inherently rewarding than the more positive and creative scholarly work in which she usually engages. One answer is her concern over the damage done to the students who are taught false lessons by such shabby means for "culturally useful purposes" to increase ethnic pride and self-confidence, and to the society in which they live. What will happen, she asks, in future years when students from different ethnic groups discover they have learned different versions of the past that have little in common? "Will students of one ethnicity deny the existence of other 'ethnic truths,' with dire consequences akin to the ethnic conflicts in the former Yugoslavia?" Will they "be no better off than the Jews who claimed that Plato studied with Moses"? Will they "have no respect for evidence, no concern with chronology, no understanding of the differences between languages and cultures"? Will they "have overlooked everything that has been learned about history since Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. began his famous inquiry into the human past"?

Another motive for her undertaking is the growth in today's academy of a movement that attempts to blur or even to remove the boundary between history and fiction, one that regards each as an alternate form of narrative, equally pliable and subjective, neither more authoritative than the other. Thus, the test of what should be taught and believed is not whether it conforms in the most rigorous way possible to the evidence explained by reasoned argument, but by what is thought to be psychologically and culturally useful, that is, to a political judgment based ultimately on power, not on the usual canons for arriving at truth. This broader concern is what, after all, best explains Professor Lefkowitz's effort. For her, "the problem with saying that Aristotle stole his philosophy from Egypt is not that modern Greeks and classicists will be offended; what's wrong with the statement is that it is untrue."

We are indebted to Professor Lefkowitz not only for her qualities as a scholar but also, sad to say, for her courage. Such is the state of American colleges and universities today that it requires valor to question the fashionable prejudices favored these days and to insist that the same standards be applied to them as to other opinions and interpretations. Inevitably, she has been called a racist, a leader of a Jewish "onslaught" against Afrocentrism, part of a conspiracy to preserve white Eurocentric hegemony. Those outside the academic world need to

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understand the terrific power of such denunciations. Among one's colleagues, such accusations produce suspicion, hostility, and fear of association. They alienate students and especially potential students, who cannot measure the charges against reality. In these respects their effects are worse than being called a Communist in the 1950s. Undaunted, Professor Lefkowitz has spoken out in the public press and in her own college. Her latest work will make it easier for others with her courage to do the same. We owe her much for her scholarship and for her character.

Sound & fury

Salman Rushdie
The Moor's Last Sigh.
Pantheon, 435 pages, $25

reviewed by Brooke Allen

The Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwah* against Salman Rushdie has done great damage to Rushdie's life. It helped bring an end to his marriage; it has made it difficult for him to arrange meetings with his young son; it has effectively exiled him from India and the city he feels to be his home, Bombay; it has forced him into a constricted existence surrounded by security agents and bodyguards.

There is one element of Rushdie's life that the *fatwah* has not harmed, however, and that is his literary reputation. The implication seems to be that if people are willing to kill a writer for his expressed views, those views, and the way they are expressed, must therefore be of supreme importance. As Rushdie himself said, "I get treated more seriously as a writer in Iran than I do here." That is no longer the case: *The Satanic Verses*, a book of questionable merits, was accorded automatic dignity and stature by the political furor it aroused. Rushdie, at the time of its publication just one of several fortyish English writers (Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, and Angela Carter, among others) who seemed to be neck and neck in their generation's competition for Great English Novelist, suddenly pulled far ahead of the pack and achieved the status of an oracle. Henceforth everything he wrote would be treated as *ex cathedra* utterances from a more or less infallible source rather than as mere—or even excellent—novels. It seems to be held that to criticize Rushdie's books is tantamount to condoning the *fatwah*, and if a negative review has appeared either here or in England of his latest novel, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, I have yet to see it.

By an accident of fate Rushdie has become the international spokesman for secularism, tolerance, and intellectual freedom. Not that he is necessarily the wrong spokesman for these values; in fact, his work has always emphasized them. As a writer his strongest suit is political satire, a genre in which he is more amusing and original than most of his contemporaries. *Shame*, with central characters based on Zia ul-Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was a sharp attack on the corrupt political life of Pakistan, and was quickly banned in that country. *The Satanic Verses* contained not only the jibes about Islam (camels speaking in the voice of the Prophet, Mecca whores named after Mohammed's wives) that got him into trouble with the fundamentalists, but a satire on immigrant assimilation and immigrant life in England. *Midnight's Children* was an intelligent critique of post-independence India and the politicians and leaders who helped to betray the promises of 1947.

The Moor's Last Sigh's most amusing and valuable points are also political ones. Like *Midnight's Children*, its central theme is post-independence India, but this time treated in a more pessimistic vein. Rushdie obliquely attacks Indira Gandhi and her cynical self-identification as India's mother-goddess; he spoofs the Hindu nationalist politics of the Indian populist Bal Thackeray (and the Russian nationalist politics of Zhirinovsky) with a grotesque neo-Fascist character named Raman Fielding; he mocks the absurdities of Soviet propaganda in the 1920s by introducing a gaggle of Indian ham actors hired by the Soviets to imper-

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sonate Lenin and spread the Communist gospel on the subcontinent.

But while Rushdie takes, and has always taken, admirable stands against bigotry, intolerance, and zealotry, it does not follow that because he has been the victim of persecution he is a great writer or even always a terribly good one. A quotation from page four of *The Moor's Last Sigh* gives enough of the flavor of the novel to make it clear that many readers, if they are honest, might find themselves repelled by Rushdie's tone and its implied self-love.

> Now, therefore, it is meet to sing of endings; of what was, and may be no longer; of what was right in it, and wrong. Also, however, a last hurrah, a final, scandalous skein of shaggy-dog yarns (words must suffice, video facility being unavailable) and a set of rowdy tunes for the wake. A Moor's tale, complete with sound and fury.

What does this indicate? First of all, it is clear that Rushdie is setting out to write something important with a capital *I*; all this fine phrasemaking amounts to an opening fanfare telling us that what is to come will be grandiose, erudite, yet at the same time "playful," that most hyped and phoney of postmodern values. The second announcement Rushdie is making is that he means to experiment with language. God forbid! After decades of linguistic theorizing, novels supposedly "about" language, and so-called "language poetry," most linguistic experimentation has become nothing more than a sign of self-indulgence. Rushdie himself has said of an early, unpublished novel of his that it was written in "sub-Joyce," and it seems to me that the description applies here as well. Take, for example, the way Rushdie's hero Moraes (the Moor) characterizes his own mixed ancestry: he is "a jewholic anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur." This is talk of the most self-conscious sort; even Joyce frequently stumbled under the weight of such labored neologisms, and Rushdie, to paraphrase Lloyd Bentsen, is no Joyce. When an author becomes intoxicated by the sound of his own voice and begins fondly to see himself as a wordsmith, only trouble can be in store.

Rushdie has a professional philosophy that bespeaks overweening self-confidence. "Go for broke. Always try and do too much. Dispense with safety nets. Take a deep breath before you begin talking. Aim for the stars. Keep grinning. Be bloody minded. Argue with the world." Good advice? Yes—but only for really great writers. Those who are even slightly less than great would do well to experiment with control, understatement, and subtlety: unostentatious virtues, but in reality more difficult and often more valuable than the hyperbole and gigantism Rushdie shoots for. Rushdie has not, has never had, any truck with subtlety. The tradition within which he hopefully places himself is that of encyclopedic, anti-realist fantasists like Cervantes, Sterne, Rabelais, and Joyce. Fine company to be in if you can hold your own, but usually he doesn't. Rushdie specializes in highly-colored surfaces, but everything is *on* the surface; there is no depth, and no subtext.

The Moor's Last Sigh is a "saga" covering four generations in a larger-than-life family (a highbrow exploitation of the popular Judith Krantz-style formula). "Mine is the story," says Moraes,

> of the fall from grace of a high-born cross-breed: me, Moraes Zogoiby, called "Moor," for most of my life the only male heir to the spice-trade-'n'-big-business crores of the da Gama-Zogoiby dynasty of Cochin, and of my banishment from what I had every right to think of as my natural life by my mother Aurora, *née* da Gama, most illustrious of our modern artists.

Moraes comes from a South Indian merchant dynasty that has made a fortune in pepper, the "black gold" that is the treasure of Southern India. The family business is significant, for in this one family Rushdie

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aims to reflect all of India and its history. "If it had not been for peppercorns, then what is ending now in East and West might never have begun. Pepper it was that brought Vasco da Gama's tall ships across the ocean."

The Moor's mother, Aurora, India's greatest artist, comes from a Portuguese line descended on the wrong side of the sheet from Vasco da Gama, while his father Abraham, who becomes the most powerful businessman in the country, is one of the ancient community of Cochin Jews, and is also an illegitimate descendent—possibly—of Boabdil, the last Moorish Sultan of Granada, expelled from Spain in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella.

Rushdie's ideal is diversity, both racial and religious. In this novel he creates several metaphors with which to celebrate it. First, the da Gama-Zogoiby family itself. Second, Bombay, the multicultural "city of mixed-up, mongrel joy" of Rushdie's own youth. His third metaphor is an imagined Eden: Moorish Granada before the *Reconquista*, in which, Rushdie implausibly posits, all races and creeds existed together in a society of infinite tolerance. Aurora the artist and the mother-figure (and, as mother, a metaphor for Mother India herself) makes Granada and Boabdil, its last Sultan, the central subject for her paintings.

But the novel is written from a post-lapsarian point of view. Multicultural Bombay has been split up by racial and religious hatred, and unscrupulous leaders have exploited religious fundamentalism to further their selfish ends. India has fallen far short of the dream that seemed possible at the moment of her independence.

Rushdie relates the failures of the Zogoiby family to these historical failures. The passionate love shared by Abraham and Aurora in their youth sours over time into equally passionate hatred. Abraham uses his gift for business to become a leader of organized crime; Aurora, the devouring and all-powerful mother, effectively destroys all four of her children. The Moor himself is maimed both emotionally and physically. Like other of Rushdie's heroes, he is plagued by symbolic maladies, in this case a life lived at double-speed: born only four and a half months after conception, he is at the time of narrating his story a thirty-six-year-old in the body of a seventy-two-year-old.

The Moor's Last Sigh contains Rushdie's usual glut of odd minor characters, including fascist thugs, "Bollywood" movie stars, yuppie business sharks, and even a reincarnation of Count Dracula hidden away in an Andalusian castle. All of this sounds funny, and frequently it is so, but more frequently Rushdie, in his efforts to achieve a humor of Rabelaisian excess, lays it on with so heavy a hand that he kills humor altogether. Take, for instance, the cringe-making idiolect Rushdie has invented for the female characters of the da Gama family: "Poor kids are such a bungle, seems like they are doomed to tumble," says Aurora, adding that her eldest daughter is beautiful "just to lookofy at, not to talk-oh to. Poor girl is limitoed in brain." All of the women in Moraes family talk this cute lingo, and if it is embarrassing in the early pages it becomes increasingly annoying as the novel wears on.

Equally annoying is Rushdie's grandiose plan to squeeze all of Western literature (and a bit of Eastern) into his scheme. *The Moor's Last Sigh* incorporates *The Divine Comedy*, *Medea*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, Shakespeare, Hans Christian Anderson, The Grimm Brothers, *El Cid*, *Dracula*—and these are just the ones I picked up on. What does this mean? Is he attempting to place himself in this august company? Is he trying to subsume these earlier narratives into his own? Is he trying to create a book that will encompass all of literature, as well as encompassing all of India? Whatever the inspiration, the gimmick quickly degenerates into a kind of Trivial Pursuit game in which the reader is challenged to match erudition with the writer, a pointless exercise that adds nothing of value to the work of art itself.

The Moor's Last Sigh will obviously appeal to readers who want something big and

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meaty, but it is by no means for everyone, in spite of its many critical kudos and the imminent bestowal, no doubt, of important literary prizes. In light of all this, it is interesting to remember the obscenity trial over the publication of D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Various "establishment" writers were called upon by the defense to testify to the book's importance, its integrity as a work of art, its high quality. All these writers did as they were asked, with the exception of E. M. Forster (who as the author of a homosexual novel unpublishable during his own lifetime might have been expected to be the ideal defense witness). *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, said Forster, was neither indecent nor immoral, and had every right to be published and distributed; but he could not be persuaded to call it a great novel. And how correct he was, on all counts! Rushdie, likewise, has a right to write what he pleases, to publish it, and to let it find its readership; but, because he has been the victim of barbaric zealotry, we need not place him above criticism, or accept everything he produces as great fiction.

Paterfamilias

Richard Brookhiser Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington. The Free Press, 230 pages, $25

reviewed by Harvey Mansfield

Richard Brookhiser remarks, and laments, that George Washington is no longer first in the hearts of his countrymen. Brookhiser's aim is to restore him in our hearts by way of our minds, an aim that if accomplished would better both our hearts and minds. His book is concise, deft in style, and animated with thought in every sentence. It is, the author says, moral biography in the mode of Plutarch. Its material is history and moral and political philosophy, but it is more practical than either because we are led to see things from Washington's point of view and thus to understand not so much his time, or the forces impinging on him, or the theories implicitly adopted by him, as his choices. The result is a wonderful success.

Brookhiser is not a historian, but he is a reproach to historians and to moral philosophers and academics generally. He uses the multi-volume biographies written by Douglas Southal Freeman and James Thomas Flexner, but, despite the lavish detail of their books, these historians did not know how to analyze the greatness of a great man. Brookhiser does. He selects the accidents in Washington's life that are not accidental, that reflect Washington's character or the habit of his anticipations and responses. He shows how Washington's character was suited to his attainments, so that the latter, while extraordinary, are no surprise.

Brookhiser says that we are not willing enough to be awed by such a man, as were his contemporaries. We believe simultaneously as idealists that ideas are self-executing and as reductionists that the men involved with them have trivial motives. Perhaps the two are connected: the ideas are advanced by historical forces men cannot adopt or control as their own but must adjust themselves to, as petty-self-seekers. The heralds of these forces are the "democratic historians" Tocqueville spoke of, a group much larger than professional historians that includes the social scientists of our day, all of them levelers and denigrators of everyone save fellow-denigrators (and only the most fashionable of them).

Brookhiser's concern with character does join with a recent trend in moral philosophy of rebellion against the notion, long dominant in analytic philosophy, that moral behavior is a matter of obeying rules and moral thinking a matter of fixing them. But the philosophers who promote character are too democratically confident that we can enjoy all the virtues, and they are professionally incapable of awe. Their remarks on character—certainly a refreshing change—do not extend to the study of actual characters. But Brookhiser shows admiringly, and without any intention to theorize, how the

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relation of passion to interest had to be Washington's concern in getting the troops of the Continental army to reenlist, or how he had to think of his reputation, his character in the eyes of others, as a factor in his own character. These are only two of several moral questions that are raised. With the aid of Brookhiser's appreciation, George Washington becomes a teacher of morality. His example does not merely illustrate the moral principle (thus falling short of it) but expands or sharpens it. Aristotle speaks of the importance of example in morality, and perhaps, if he had been more interested in morality, he would have written a version of Plutarch's *Lives* to extend the generalities in the *Ethics*.

Brookhiser, who is not an academic, is more open than academics to the possibility of learning unacademically. He does not—to use an academic word—thematize. Neither did George Washington. Washington was concise, and his conciseness requires interpretation from observers—but not too much, please. Too much interpretation leads us into condescension as we begin to think we understand the subject better than he understood himself, and we lose our awe for the individual being explained. But in the upper reaches of morality it is the individual who matters. Having a moral character prepares one for the exercise of judgment, and judgment is always individual, always better or worse than following a rule. So a certain detachment from academic detachment was necessary to this fine book.

Only a third of the book is on Washington's "career." (I cannot call him "George"; Brookhiser relates that John Marshall in his biography spoke of the birth of "Mr. Washington.") Brookhiser moves quickly from one insight to the next in his account of what ought to be familiar incidents and events: Washington's reproof of mutineers in the Continental army (other armies have suffered worse for lesser causes, he told them, implying simultaneously that they were something special and nothing special); his refusal to entertain a proposal by Colonel Lewis Nicola that he become king, which featured his appeal to the Colonel to show "respect for me"; Washington's objection to Shays's Rebellion, which he saw as a crisis of self-government, as opposed to Thomas Jefferson's distant, Machiavellian approval for such uprisings that may cost lives but preserve the spirit of resistance; the effect of Washington's presence in the Constitutional Convention, though he merely presided and said nothing during the deliberations except with the expressions on his face—especially on the decision to have a single executive, which would of course be himself; and his reactions to the Whiskey Rebellion and to Jay's treaty, seen by Brookhiser as Washington's insistence on constitutional propriety—the necessity that (again contrary to Jefferson) decisions of a republican people "only be unmade in the same way they had been made." These, and others, are lessons in politics as well as items of a career.

After dealing with Washington's career, Brookhiser turns to character, the core of the book. He finds Washington's character compounded of his nature, his morals, and his ideas; and he explains their relationship. His natural good looks and passionate temper forced people to take notice of him, and his ideas (much underestimated by his modern biographers) gave him direction. But his morals, especially his concern for civility and reputation, held him together, connected him with his fellow Americans, and gave power to his ideas.

To many philosophers of our day, who believe that natural endowments are an unjustifiable privilege, it would seem unfair to use such gifts to advantage. A handsome man should be clumsy and keep his face in a grimace; a brainy one should act dumb (which, indeed, these philosophers do). George Washington did just the contrary. He actually cultivated his imposing good looks by learning to dance and ride a horse well, and he enhanced them by wearing splendid uniforms. No doubt he wanted to

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put himself in the opposite of what Jürgen Habermas calls the "ideal speech situation." Whereas for the egalitarian Habermas that situation is one in which no one has an advantage, for Washington it was the one in which you get your way by saying little or nothing. Washington also had a hot temper, and he took advantage of that, too, by letting it show now and again so that people were afraid of it. As a result even his self-control was impressive and he got credit for both keeping and losing his temper.

Washington's morals took the form of politeness in doing honor to others and in accepting honors from them. Honor is the spring of monarchy, said Montesquieu, but Washington practiced the honor due among equals or near equals, republican honor. How should a man behave who gets the acclaim of a Napoleon—twice elected president by a unanimous Electoral College—but who wants neither the office of a tyrant nor the submission of a subject people? Washington always acted with a view to his reputation, that is, his reputation among a free people. He would not have cared for "authenticity," the tyrannical desire to free the inner self from external control or concern for opinion, which we have persuaded ourselves to believe superior to reputation.

The "Rules of Civility," a list of one-hundred and ten specifics that Washington copied out by hand as a boy and, according to Brookhiser, followed as a man, make an enlightening and humiliating contrast to a moral handbook of authenticity in our time, such as *Catcher in the Rye*. The list would also make an interesting comparison with Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, a rival, contemporary presentation of republican civility. Franklin is less Roman, less political, and more bourgeois. He also discloses himself to be something of a scamp and a sneak, which one cannot imagine of Washington. Washington, a sometime land speculator, sought his own interest and thought it right to do so, but his principal interest was his ambition, suitably republicanized.

And what is the highest ambition that is suitably republican? To be father of one's country. George Washington was not a man of ideas, but he had ideas that he took from men of ideas, above all from Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson. These were the mentors of a man who had hardly more than a grade school education. Yet Washington remained above them, choosing to accept their advice as he thought right. Brookhiser diminishes the seriousness of their disagreements, which were, one is sure, more than quarrels. His book could well have been longer if he had explained at length why Washington took the side of Hamilton and the Federalist party versus Madison and Jefferson and the Republicans. These men were not Washington, but they were not lesser men to be disdained, of the caliber, say, of Lincoln's cabinet.

Brookhiser takes fatherhood seriously. We can forgive him for not discoursing on the fact that George Washington was a gentleman, because defending both gentleman and father would require superhuman bravery today. He discusses modern sources for the idea of political fatherhood, including Sir Robert Filmer and Viscount Bolingbroke. His treatment of Bolingbroke is a special delight because he has the good sense, and is sufficiently lacking in academic conscience, to call him a scoundrel. But, it might be suggested to him, the true model is in Aristotle. For Aristotle, the highest moral character is the magnanimous man whose actions are few but great and distinguished. What would he do? The answer appears in Aristotle's discussion of political friendship, in which political regimes are compared to the family, not vice versa. We call George Washington the father of his country, not the president of his family. A president is not a father but he is like a father, or approaches one, in his benevolence and willing responsibility; a president in a family would be chilly and remote because he would be too lawful. Thus the family, the more natural association, is the model (though an unrealizable one) for politics. As Brookhiser says, fatherhood "must go beyond what is merely natural"—

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but political fatherhood goes beyond that toward what is fully natural, an investment in the welfare of family members as a father, not a stranger, sees it.

As Brookhiser points out, the father in this case is republican, a father who knows that he must let go of his charges, and who therefore deliberately dramatizes the occasion of his departures from public life. Washington, an avid theater-goer, staged his exit from the office of Commander in Chief of the Continental Army as well as from the presidency in order to serve as an example for "millions yet unborn." He shared in the modern, and peculiarly American, ambition (foreign to Aristotle and Plutarch) to provide for the edification of all mankind an example of the success of a new, improved republican form of government. His fatherhood is quite without paternalism, so much so that, if successful, it would obviate almost any need for political fatherhood to go further than his own. We admire him, and are obliged to him, as much for his forbearance as for his great deeds: Washington is a hero of freedom. If our generation of Americans remains unappreciative, it will not be the fault of Richard Brookhiser.

Testament & will

John Sloan, editor
Selected Poems and Prose
of John Davidson.
Oxford University Press,
206 pages, $39.95

John Sloan John Davidson,
First of the Moderns:
A Literary Biography.
Oxford University Press,
306 pages, $49.95

reviewed by X. J. Kennedy

It is hard to think of a poet who, despite persistent interest in his work, has remained more deeply in the shade than John Davidson (1857–1909). Most probably, the poems by which he wanted to be remembered have discouraged would-be readers: long, blank-verse declamations meant to advance his militant materialist ideas. Wisely, John Sloan, in his selection from Davidson's poetry, gives us no more than tolerably short extracts from them. Then, too, Davidson stifled his reputation by leaving a foolish will that in effect kept the bulk of his work from being reprinted for fifty years. As a result, he has posthumously suffered indifference and neglect, as he did in life.

At least, since his death in the first decade of this century, his poems have drawn high praise from notables. Virginia Woolf once expressed perplexity that a writer of such caliber could be "so little famous," while both T. S. Eliot and Hugh MacDiarmid acknowledged deep debts to him. Davidson, said MacDiarmid, was "the only Scottish poet to whom I owe anything at all." Eliot testified that for him Davidson's entire work merited homage, despite its "uncongenial" philosophy, and in particular the ballad "Thirty Bob a Week" stood out as "a great poem for ever."

If ambition alone could make a poet major, then Davidson would loom beside Milton, Spencer, and the megalomaniac Pound. In his late "Testament" poems, he seeks to do nothing less than sweep aside the wreckage of Christianity and replace it with a strictly material universe, whose dead atoms evolved, by happy chance, into the conscious human race. A few people are more conscious and therefore more admirable than the rest. (A certain fondness for superheroes made people call Davidson a Nietzschean, a label he insistently denied.) Unfortunately, reading the "Testaments" is rather like gulping down a slowly unrolling ball of string, with knots in it. In the first, *Testament of a Vivisector*, a strong-willed narrator rides herd over the animal kingdom—"searching into the secrets of Nature," explained Davidson, "in his own bloody way." As the series unfolds, it would appear that the poet is going spectacularly mad. *The Testament of John Davidson* opens with a spirited pitch for suicide, then recounts an

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assault upon the goddess Diana by a heroic stud named John Davidson. Worse, the hero's descent into Hell doesn't end things. There, he suffers a magnificent crucifixion and returns to earth all the better for it. Readers fond of Davidson tend to prefer his musical, Tennysonian lyrics, his ballads in popular style, his sure and touching evocations of the lives of working people trapped in an industrial world.

As Sloan demonstrates in his biography, Davidson eludes categories. Was he a Scottish poet or an English one, a *fin-de-siècle* decadent or a twentieth-century modern? Davidson rejected the notion of writing in Scots dialect, quit his native Scotland, went to London and took up the cause of British imperialism. He joined the Rhymers' Club but thought it lacked "blood and guts," and he didn't hit it off with Yeats. And although he contributed to *The Yellow Book*, made friends with Max Beerbohm and Oscar Wilde, and published a novel about flagellation (with graphic art by Aubrey Beardsley), his tastes weren't consistently mauve. He liked manly robustness and music-hall balladry. Besides, it was hard to sip absinthe in cafés and remain a family man.

Although in his essay "The Art of Poetry" Davidson blasts rhyme as mere excrescence "like a sixth finger," the rhyming ballad "Thirty Bob a Week" is his masterpiece. An ill-paid clerk laments his life: riding the underground ("like a mole . . . in the dark"), trying to support a wife and children in "three rooms about the size of traveling trunks." He voices the fury that wells inside him:

> I step into my heart and there I meet
> A god-almighty devil singing small,
> Who would like to shout and whistle in
> the street,
> And squelch the passers flat against the
> wall . . .

Yet he feels himself divided between this angry demon and an other self who meekly submits. Davidson's chief ideas are here: that matter is all there is (and perhaps "we are lost and damn'd and served up hot to God"); that the speaker has evolved out of mollusk and ape into consciousness. The poem takes authority from the experience of a poet who for much of his life earned that same miserable sum, more or less. Survival on thirty bob a week becomes an art of heroic jugglery:

> It's a naked child against a hungry wolf;
> It's playing bowls upon a splitting wreck;
> It's walking on a string across a gulf
> With millstones fore-and-aft about your
> neck;
> But the thing is daily done by many and many
> a one;
> And we fall, face forward, fighting, on the
> deck.

In this ballad, Davidson fuses his mystic-materialist philosophy and his poetry seamlessly; and in fact, he scored more than a single triumph. If Randall Jarrell was right and all a poet need do to be declared "major" is to be struck by a dozen true lightning bolts, than surely Davidson garnered his dozen. Most are in Sloan's selection. I miss "The Wastrel," but to his credit Sloan includes "A Ballad of Hell" (a self-contained excerpt from "Christmas Eve"), about a woman who kills herself in order to join her lover in the fiery furnace. When she arrives, she finds herself jilted. God takes pity on her, she is ushered into Heaven, and the poem triumphantly ends with two superb lines: "Amazed to find it could rejoice,/ Hell raised a hoarse half-human cheer." Others of Davidson's successful poems include "A Northern Suburb," "In Romney Marsh," "The Outcast," and "A Runnable Stag," this last a dreamlike experiment in rhyme and rhythm, in which a noble stag, pursued by hunters, plunges into the sea and drowns—a beast with which the poet may well have felt empathy.

Back in 1973, Andrew Turnbull brought out a two-volume *Poems of John Davidson*, but his edition supplies more of Davidson's blank verse than most readers will need.

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John Sloan's new selection, at least as strong as Maurice Lindsay's of 1961, may be more likely to appeal. The prose portion, though, seems a bit anemic. It gives us short extracts from Davidson's writings about poetry and some twenty letters, or pieces of them; but Davidson's fecundity was greater than that. For nearly twenty years he earned his bread in London's Grub Street—writing plays and novels, adapting French plays, ghost-writing, reviewing, churning out newspaper articles. Not a scrap of his verse dramas, none of his fiction, no writing on subjects other than poetry are here, despite intriguing mentions of them in Sloan's biography. Sloan may well know what he is doing, and is going easy on us; still, it would be satisfying to have more prose, and be able to judge for ourselves.

In any case, Sloan's biography, only the second to be written and incorporating new-found material, tells the story of Davidson's tormented life absorbingly, fully, yet economically. That life was a continual tussle with melancholy, rejections by publishers and stage managers, critical misunderstandings, insomnia, hypochondria, family demands, and a chronic shortage of cash. In the end, when Davidson finally received a pension from the Civil List, he was granted a mere hundred pounds a year—hardly enough to keep him in cigars. Even that modest sum drew protests from those who wondered what business the King, Defender of the Faith, had in subsidizing a militant atheist. At fifty-two, deeply depressed and hating Cornwall, where he had moved to obtain cheap rent, Davidson seems to have put a bullet through his head and let his body drop into the sea. Sloan carefully traces the origins of Davidson's personal tragedy, and does a capital job of setting the poet in the context of literary London of his day. His discussions of the poems themselves are shrewd and pointed.

Indeed, the only aspect of Davidson's life and thought that Sloan seems to neglect is the poet's politics, or distrust of any: his favoring of aristocratic rule over representative government. I would have thought it at least worth mention that, while profoundly sympathetic to the working class, Davidson had an aversion to Socialism, which seemed to him to encourage a dull, gray society—it struck "debasing bargains with the mob" ("Epilogue" to *God and Mammon: Mammon and His Message*).

If Sloan is correct and there is a new flurry of curiosity about Davidson, we may wonder whether this off-putting, underestimated writer will yet take his place beside Hardy, Hopkins, and other distinguished early moderns. Davidson's reputation deserves an upward hoist, I think, for his ballads and lyrics alone. After all, far more drastic revisions of our literary pantheon have occurred lately, on behalf of neglected women and native Americans. But who knows? As the Russians say—referring to the many Soviet and post-Soviet revisions of their history—our past is entirely unpredictable.

Galumphing back

Morton N. Cohen
Lewis Carroll: A Biography.
Knopf, 577 pages, $35

reviewed by Guy Davenport

Professor Cohen's biography of the Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (1832–1898), the culmination of thirty years' research, begins by lamenting our not having a recording of his voice. We have Tennyson, who died six years before Dodgson, huffing out "The Charge of the Light Brigade" like an asthmatic walrus, and we have Victoria intoning bashfully, "My dear subjects," followed by noise in which we can make out one other word ("tomatoes"). She had dried up after a brave beginning and had been prompted to describe the room where she was speaking into the large end of a megaphone connected to a wiggling needle graphing her imperial voice onto a wax cylinder. A witness remembered hothouse tomatoes in a bowl.

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There survives of Dodgson's sixty-six years his books (the two "Alice" volumes, *Sylvie and Bruno* and its sequel, treatises on logic and mathematics), his diaries, his photographs of Oxford luminaries and of children, and 98,721 letters. Four years of the diaries are still missing. Pages have been razored out of the others. The family at the time of his death had to remove his belongings from his rooms at Christ Church. They burned papers all day, depriving the world of a *Symbolic Logic* and Lord knows what else. Dodgson himself had destroyed many photographs. His life was wonderfully full and strangely empty.

At every turn in Professor Cohen's biography we see a generous and gifted soul diligently trying to engage with a world that only occasionally appreciated or even understood his gifts. He was a teacher without students. If his career were reduced to that of an Oxford tutor, his biography (for which no biographer can be imagined) would be a grim agony of a mathematical genius trying to prepare Bertie Woosters for exams, with a subplot of campaigning for higher standards, to keep Oxford math from being a scandal among European universities.

He was a pastor without a congregation. This isn't as Trollopean as it sometimes sounds, as his ministry was admirably Christian and unobtrusively liberal. Professor Cohen goes into Dodgson's theology, showing how Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* guided him into an intellectually rigorous clarity. Dodgson did not believe in Hell. We do not know exactly what he did believe. He was not a Calvinist; Rome had no claims on his attention. Though he was persnickety about reverence for the cloth, his Christianity was far more broad-minded and charitable than that of his father, who rose to be a pillar of the church as both a scholar and a bastion of orthodoxy.

Dodgson was a pioneer photographer in the days when one had to be a skilled chemist as well as an artist. His portraits of Oxford luminaries (Ruskin, Liddell, Lord Salisbury) and of children constitute an *oeuvre* without parallel in the history of art. For his photography alone he might be remembered as a master who recorded domestic England at a time when it was having a Renaissance in prose, poetry, and science.

The "Alice" books were almost an accident. They were generated, like the photography, by the Rev. Dodgson's love of children. Contemporary psychology and ethics proscribe a love that was veritably prescribed by Greek and Roman culture, and which is distorted by historical perspective. Juliet was twelve, the age of Samuel de Champlain's bride. Pocahontas was nine when she saved Capt. Smith's neck. "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage" was dedicated to Lady Charlotte Mary Harley, age eleven. The Roman poet Ausonius fell in love with a toddler of the Belgii, bought her, freed her, and made her his housekeeper. And there was Ruskin with his adoration of prepubescence. Professor Cohen is admirably open-minded about Dodgson's preference for the immature. Psychology does not come to his aid: it understands arrested sexuality to be on Freud's scale of development, which would require Dodgson's being interested in boys, not girls, of his psychological age. Psychiatry is locked into generalities and statistics; the individual psyche must fit a pattern. It seems to me that Dodgson was a thoroughly pagan idolator. He saw something numinous and worshipful in Alice and her ilk, something doubly sacred in that Alice was not only something of a goddess but a deity for a few years only.

This poignant fact also locates a principle in Dodgson's concerns. He was a student of metamorphosis, especially of transmutations in a logical process. Both mathematics and Christian ethics involve orderly mutations. Dodgson invented game after game of word ladders and math puzzles (one of these became Scrabble). The "Alice" books are a wonderland of the illogical, the comic, and the absurd, written with a didactic understanding that they are to be enjoyed by

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the logical, the serious, and the sensible child.

Dodgson's maturest inventory of his imagination—*Sylvie and Bruno* (a novel, and its sequel)—has never been popular. Its contribution to psychology is immense, for in it Dodgson maps the operations of the mind that we all live with every waking moment: we perceive and we imagine simultaneously. The mind is in a constant revery (the stuff of dreams) while it mixes cake batter, orates in Congress, or drives a car. Dodgson is himself present in *Sylvie and Bruno*, invisibly or as a character. Sylvie is a fairy, a real little girl like Alice (but Alice's inferior in wit and sass), and a mature woman. The setting is Fairyland, contemporary England, and a comic-opera Ruritania that bears a wicked resemblance to Christ Church, Oxford. Bruno is a baby-talking cutie that only a mother could abide or a Victorian nanny control. Dodgson gives the novel the shape of a sentimental romance while hollowing out brilliant spaces for his best surrealist poetry and for the wholly original scenes in which time runs backwards and the venues fade from one to the other. Joyce appropriated this magic effect for *Finnegans Wake*, as well as the device of multiple identities in one character. It is likely that Nabokov, a devoted Carrollian, was indebted to *Sylvie and Bruno* for the mechanics of *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.

Morton Cohen is aware throughout this deeply researched and densely detailed biography that he is recording a new kind of sensibility in English literature. It was a sensibility from which *Euclid and His Modern Rivals* could follow *Hunting of the Snark* and precede *Sylvie*. It was both stoic and hedonistic, chaste and erotic, masculine and feminine. Only intermittently in this biography do we get a sense of how Dodgson stood in his world. He became and persisted in being a pest as a photographer. He was a mystery and a nuisance to the parents of little girls he courted. He was a gadfly to the university in keeping up academic standards and a holy terror on committees. He was a shameless celebrity stalker; it is difficult to make out if Tennyson abided him or liked him. It is painful to see him turned away from the Liddells and other houses. Enough of Mr. Dodgson was quite enough. It is unclear whether his trip to Russia with the Rev. Henry Parry Liddon is something out of Jerome K. Jerome or a genuine exploration of other religions. (There are several editions of the *Russian Journal*, one edited by Professor Cohen.) Dodgson's one trip abroad is interesting in that we can see him against a different background. He is still Dodgson, fussily master of himself and situations, intrepidly curious and keenly alive.

His vast Oxford rooms were a habitat as richly Victorian as Darwin's famous study or Ruskin's cluttered rooms at Brantwood. It was a true *studio* in which Leonardo would have felt at home. It was, in effect, a museum with Dodgson as its curator and guide. Music boxes to amuse children vied with mathematical treatises for space. It was a room in which the most delightful poetry and the most popular book in English were written, a room in which grave scholars and beautiful children were photographed. We will probably never understand the guarded secret of Dodgson's polyhedral genius. Morton Cohen's biography is as complete and searching a study of that genius as we are likely to have for some time.

Shorter notices

Pierre de la Rufinière du Prey The Villas of Pliny from Antiquity to Posterity. The University of Chicago Press, 377 pages, $65

Rarely, perhaps once in a generation, does an enterprising scholar step forth with a truly novel research idea and the capacity to see it through. Pierre de la Rufinière du Prey's *The Villas of Pliny from Antiquity to Posterity* is just this: an utterly fascinating, deliciously composed, and copiously illustrated treatment of a neglected theme in

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architectural history. Although it is the author's object to document the perennial allure for post-medieval architects of Pliny the Younger's literary picture of villa life in ancient Rome, the book's overall theme could be equally understood as the enduring architectural potency of one man's idea of "the good life." Du Prey succeeds triumphantly both in the close compass of the historian's exercise and in broader quality-of-life issues.

The book opens with a leisurely literary examination of Pliny's Como letters and proceeds to articulate the four "cardinal points" of a villa described in the epistles to Gallus and Domitius Apollinaris. Judiciously, du Prey furnishes translations of these missives as appendices; the translation upon which he relies is John Boyle's unsurpassed mid-eighteenth-century text. After setting forth some of the basic themes that unite various projects across the centuries, the author proceeds through a historical sequence of reconstruction exercises and built designs, each determined by a conscious reflection upon Pliny's descriptions of his Laurentine and Tuscan villas. From the Medici's documented interest through various "ruins and restitutions" and "emulations," du Prey offers the reader an engaging tour through one of the most imaginatively fertile corridors of architectural history.

Although some of this material will be familiar to readers of James S. Ackerman's recent study *The Villa: Form and Ideology of Country Houses*, du Prey's fidelity to the literary exigencies of his topic keeps him from wandering back to familiar stylistic comparisons with survey material. In fact, it is du Prey's tenacity in seeking out new imagery that keeps one eagerly turning the pages to digest the projects of Francesco Lazzari, William Newton, Stanislas Potocki, Friedrich August Krubsacius, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Louis-Pierre Haudebourt, Jules-Frédéric Bouchet, and Wilhelm Stier. Not only has du Prey expanded our understanding of historically well-established figures like Palladio and Félibien, he has also tilled the fields of relatively obscure talents to great advantage. The author dedicates the majority of one closing chapter to detailed discussions of several designs for a 1982 exhibition and colloquium in Paris; this amounts to a sustained essay in architectural criticism, and many readers will agree that, compared to his historical labors, the section constitutes the least successful portion of the book. Nevertheless, one hopes this study will generate an increased awareness of the significance of the Pliny theme and that other treatments—such as Constantine Lipsius's 1889 project in the archive of Dresden's Academy of Fine Arts—will find their way into a future edition.

The opportunity to survey such a rich thematic vein as Pliny's legacy invites one to make new connections and associations. One such thought is that *The Villas of Pliny* should be regarded as a signal contribution to a growing awareness that, in terms of the History of Ideas, the overall continuity of much of nineteenth-century art and architectural theory with what has been called the "Renaissance-Baroque system" is more in evidence than ever before. In other words, while generations of scholars have tended to locate the formal sources of "modernity" in the late eighteenth century, the strands linking nineteenth-century ideas about art and creativity to much earlier periods are increasingly difficult to ignore. Although such a perspective tends to attenuate the rupture of the "High Modernism" of the 1920s, the conceptual musculature of historicism is perhaps better defined.

Regardless of the book's manifold historiographic value, its significance as a stirring, unforgettable read is impossible to deny.

—*J. Duncan Berry*

Johanna Drucker
The Alphabetic Labyrinth:
The Letters in History and Imagination.
Thames & Hudson, 320 pages, $45

The letters you are now reading came down to us, by way of Greek and Phoenician, from a Canaanite source probably

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developed in the Sinai between 1700 and 1500 B.C. Along with Chinese characters, which also appeared, curiously enough, around 1700 B.C., the proto-alphabet is ancestor to all living scripts, from Cyrillic to Persian to Armenian—this according to Johanna Drucker, whose mesmerizing book begins with a summary of origins as they are currently understood, and proceeds through the many accounts, both magisterial and loony, that humanity has given of its letters.

Or are they God's? Across the religious spectrum and into the nineteenth century, writing was generally assumed to be of divine provenance; Ganesh even snapped off one of his tusks to use as an ur-pen. To the Kabbalists, the Hebrew alphabet comprised the very stuff by which God brought—or, more properly, wrote—the world into being, each letter with its attendant angel. They shared with Gnostics and alchemists (to name only the least fringy devotees) a belief in the alphabet as repository of hidden knowledge. The hapless neo-Pythagorean Iamblichus tried to tap that esoterica using alectryomancy—divination by means of a letter-pecking fowl; he may have been executed because a chicken predicted (accurately, as it turned out) the emperor's death.

Naturally, mavens had their pet favorites. The Pythagoreans as a whole were partial to *upsilon*, whose "Y" shape suggested to them the forked paths open to the initiate. Marcos the Gnostic, meanwhile, doted on the old Greek *digamma*, since it had been mysteriously dropped from the ranks. Vowels were often accorded special status, pegged as they were to the planetary gods or the celestial spheres; Plutarch made known his affinities in *Essay on the Letter E at Delphi*. One dissenter gave the nod to consonants, however, by pointing out that any Eurasian vowel sound can be petulantly intoned by the average housecat.

Vowels versus consonants; an antediluvian alphabet versus a post-; a sacred set of lapidary signs versus an arbitrary accretion of all-too-secular marks; the finger (or tusk) of God versus the hand of man: these are some of the debates that have inflamed the literate millennia. Those weighing in on such issues include Herodotus, Plato, Pliny, Lucretius, Josephus, Cornelius Agrippa, Descartes, Defoe, Victor Hugo, Mallarmé, and Robert Graves. Yet the most vivid denizens of Drucker's narrative are not the aforementioned grandees, but rather those obscure alphabet buffs who have sallied forth with the omnivorous enthusiasm of conspiracy theorists, and often with as little rigor. In fact, the two groups occasionally overlap, as in the Hibernian yo-yo out to unmask the fact that Homer was a Celt. Another harmlessly proved Egyptian hieroglyphics to be of Irish derivation, while L. A. Waddell's 1927 *The Aryan Origin of the Alphabet* was, needless to observe, more sinister in its tendentiousness.

By and large, though, there is a strange, syncretic beauty to even the daftest of these enterprises. They inevitably come bristling with all manner of charts and diagrams (many of them strikingly reproduced here), and with names like *Anaclypsis* and *The One Primeval Language traced Experimentally through Ancient Inscriptions in Alphabetic Characters of Lost Power From the Four Continents including the Voice of Israel from the Rocks of Sinai and the vestiges of Patriarchal Tradition from the Monuments of Egypt, Etruria and S. Arabia*. Although there are plenty of sober scholars mixed in with cranks like G. F. Ennis, who established that the aboriginal script of Atlantis could be dredged up from the nursery rhyme "Ina Mena Mina Mo," veracity is almost beside the point—what matters (or at least what fascinates) is the sheer imaginative ardor of the systems. As an archive of those systems, *The Alphabetic Labyrinth* is invaluable. It runs a dexterous line straight through Western civilization, and does so with a subject most of us take no less for granted than air or tap water, but which, after reading Drucker's book, we could never again neglect.

—*Ben Downing*

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Notebook

Tom: the making of "The Glass Menagerie"

by William Jay Smith

In April 1946, exactly a year after it had opened to phenomenal success at the Playhouse Theatre in New York, I attended a performance of *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams with Laurette Taylor in the role of Amanda Wingfield. Ashton Stevens, reviewing the play for the *Herald-American* when it first opened in Chicago in December 1944, called it "a lovely thing and an original thing. It has the courage of true poetry couched in colloquial prose. It is eerie and earthy in the same breath." He added that in fifty years of first-nighting he had encountered few jolts so "miraculously electrical" as Taylor's portrayal and that he had not been so moved "since Eleanora Duse gave her last performance on this planet." My reaction was equally intense: I sat absolutely transfixed as Laurette Taylor, with every syllable of her insistent, purring Southern speech, every seemingly off-hand but carefully calculated gesture, wove a web of magic. The play was about all those little things in life that get easily broken, and its fragility was encapsulated like ice on winter branches that might snap at any moment. This magic was close to madness, and for me this madness had a special meaning.

Over a period of time in the not-so-distant past, I had known the four characters in this play, the mother, her son, her daughter, and the gentleman who came to call, and here they all were, brought to life before my eyes with the transmutation that only art can provide. The play's poetry came as no surprise because the narrator it depicts had been more a poet than a playwright when I first met him in 1935. Thomas Lanier Williams (1911–1983) had enrolled as a special student at Washington University in St. Louis, where I was a freshman. We met through Clark Mills McBurney, a graduate student in French, who, as Clark Mills, had published poetry in national magazines. The three of us organized a chapter of the College Poetry Society, and, as its most active members, met regularly at Tom's house near the university to discuss our poems. Tall, sandy-haired, brilliant, and assured, Clark was our leader. In sharp contrast to his ebullient nature, Tom was the shiest person I had ever met. He would sit at great length stony-faced, until suddenly and often inexplicably like a volcano erupting he would burst out with a high cackle and then with resounding and uncontrollable laughter. While Tom was quiet and withdrawn, his mother, Edwina Williams, a busy little woman, never stopped talking. Greeting us, she exuded Southern charm, as she did for all gentlemen callers, especially those she saw as possible suitors for her daughter. The most prominent of these had been Roger Moore, a handsome, brilliant Rhodes Scholar and Yale Ph.D., who lived across the street, but he soon bowed out, committing suicide after losing an election for mayor of University City, the local community. Edwina's constant chatter had a nightmarish quality to it. There was little inflection or

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warmth in the steady flow of her speech. One topic, no matter how trivial, received the same emphasis as the next, which might be utterly tragic. I had the impression listening to her that the words she pronounced were like the red balls in a game of Chinese checkers, all suddenly released and clicking quickly and aimlessly about the board. In the background, or rather seeming to drift always on a cloud above us since she remained upstairs in her room, appearing only occasionally, was Tom's beautiful but unbalanced sister, Rose. The last time I saw her, she came down while Tom was entertaining a group of us with drinks when both his parents were away. Pale and trembling, in a fluffy dress, Rose drifted down the stairs, apparently knocked off kilter by some of the rough language she had overheard. It was not long afterward that we understood that she had been confined to a mental institution. In the background also, a sinister presence brooding over the scene, was Tom's father, Cornelius, to whose violent drunken behavior he seldom alluded, and who now, in Tom's play, remained offstage, a telephone man who had fallen "in love with long distances." This household, which I had observed close-up without fully understanding, had now been brought sharply into focus, all its secrets revealed, and the effect was electrifying, painful but stunning to contemplate.

The only other time in my life that I had responded in such a manner to a great actress was in February 1936, when with Tom Williams I attended a performance of Alla Nazimova in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which we witnessed from the third balcony, the "peanut gallery" of the American Theatre in St. Louis. Lyle Leverich, in the first of a two-volume biography of Tennessee Williams,[1] devotes considerable attention to this performance by the Russian actress and its effect on young Tom, who said later that it was "one of the things that made me want to write for the theater." He had found Nazimova's playing "so fabulous, so terrifyingly exciting . . . so moving that I had to go and walk in the lobby during the last act. I'd stand in the door and look in, then I'd rush back to the lobby again." My memory is that rather than rushing back and forth to the lobby, which would have been impossible in any case from the balcony where we were seated, Tom had remained quieter than I had ever seen him, totally dazed, robbed of speech by the hypnotic rhythms of the great actress in the role of Mrs. Alving as she coped with the encroaching madness of her syphilitic son.

As I walked out of the Playhouse Theatre, Laurette Taylor's magical evocation of the household I had known was broken when I looked up and saw standing on the curb away from the crowd—as if he had himself stepped off the stage or had emerged, a ghost from that earlier era—the author of this memorable play. He smiled, and greeted me as he had so many times on his own doorstep. He had come again to see the production, he explained, because he had received reports that Julie Haydon, portraying the sister around whom the play revolves, had been over-acting and upsetting the play's delicate balance. He had found this to be true, although, overwhelmed by Laurette Taylor's performance, I hadn't noticed anything of the sort. Julie Haydon, with her emaciated beauty and a facial expression bordering on ecstasy, seemed perfect in the role of Laura for to the character's physical infirmity she brought toward the end of the play a suggestion of oncoming madness. But in Chicago, Laurette Taylor had become annoyed by the adulation that Haydon showed her during curtain calls and had pushed her aside when she first tried to kiss Taylor's hand and then stooped to kiss her skirt. It may have been antics of this sort that Tom had now detected but that had escaped me.

I initially felt somewhat uneasy in the presence of the new, successful Tennessee Williams (Tom had changed his name in Memphis in 1938 when he submitted a

1 *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, by Lyle Leverich; Crown, 644 pages, $35.

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group of one-act plays to the Group Theatre in New York for a contest in which he received a special award of $100). But he soon put me at ease, and as we recalled the events of our St. Louis years together, he exploded with laughter, as he always had, when I mentioned *Ishtar*, one of the first full-length plays he had written. It was a kind of Babylonian bedroom saga in the manner of "The Vengeance of Nitocris," the story he had sold to *Weird Tales*, and although Tom had meant it to be deadly serious, Clark and I, to whom he read it one evening, both found it hilarious. It was not long afterward that he turned to Alabama coal miners as a subject and wrote *Candles to the Sun*, the St. Louis production of which first convinced me that Tom would make his mark as a playwright rather than as a poet.

How very different, I could not help thinking, this New York evening was from the one in Boston on which I had last seen him, when the curtain came down on the opening of the Theatre Guild's production of *Battle of Angels* in December 1940. Then smoke from the smoke machine had come pouring into the theater, choking Miriam Hopkins and the others on stage, and engulfing an audience reeling from the violence of a flawed but stunning drama. It was Tom's first great opportunity, and it was a complete fiasco. I had accompanied him across the Boston Common to his hotel, and, to take his mind off his failure, had sat for hours, at his request, reading aloud to him the poems of John Donne.

In *Tom*, Lyle Leverich celebrates *The Glass Menagerie* and the traumatic experience of the playwright's first thirty-four years that went into its making. The book traces in detail the path between *Battle of Angels* and *The Glass Menagerie*, a path so strewn with obstacles that it seems almost miraculous that they were finally overcome. Williams began writing the play in 1943 in Hollywood, when Pandro Berman at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer handed him material to rewrite for Lana Turner. He told his agent Audrey Wood that he felt "a little guilty about the time I *don't* spend on the Turner script and there are days when just looking at it brings on amnesia, anemia, and the St. Vitus dance!" Soon removed from the script, he wrote a story called "Portrait of a Girl in Glass" and the synopsis of a film treatment of what he called *The Gentleman Caller*. (It is fortunate that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer turned down this first outline of *The Glass Menagerie*, but it is interesting that Williams initially conceived his play in cinematic terms.) In "Portrait" he wrote, "I don't believe that my sister was actually foolish. I think the petals of her mind had simply closed through fear. I see the faint and sorrowful radiance of the glass, hundreds of little transparent pieces of it in very delicate colors. I hold my breath, for if my sister's face appears among them—the night is hers!" A few months earlier, when his mother informed him of the lobotomy that had been performed on his sister, in a notebook he wrote, "Rose. Her head cut open/ A knife thrust in her brain." In setting down *The Gentleman Caller*, he drew on his childhood memories of Clarksdale, Mississippi, where he listened on Sunday to the sermons of his beloved grandfather, Reverend Walter Dakin, and where a friend of the Dakins, a Maggie Wingfield, ran two "de luxe boarding houses, and who had a collection of glass animals in her front window, tiny little glass animal figures. When the sun hit them, everyone would remark that they were absolutely gorgeous."

A year later, Audrey Wood offered *The Gentleman Caller* to the successful Broadway producer Eddie Dowling, "not so much for production," she said, "but for an opinion of the playwright's unusual talent." Mrs. Dowling, the comedienne Ray Dooley, read the play and warned her husband that if he did not immediately take an option on it, someone else would. Dowling turned to the critic George Jean Nathan, who had reservations about the play but saw it as a possible vehicle for his friend Julie Haydon, whom he would eventually marry. Nathan's choice for the role of

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Amanda Wingfield was Laurette Taylor, who had long been in retirement, had taken to drink after the death of her playwright husband and manager, and had made a brief comeback in *Outward Bound*. She had been reading scripts for years but had discovered nothing suitable for herself. But with *The Gentleman Caller* she knew that she had found what she had been waiting for. The play was soon in production, but even after it opened to ecstatic reviews in Chicago, it attracted an audience only after the critics Claudia Cassidy and Ashton Stevens campaigned vigorously to keep it going.

It is appropriate that Lyle Leverich should write of Tom's beginnings, because it was through the play he celebrates that they first met in 1976 in San Francisco. Leverich, who had established the Showcase Theatre there, planned a West Coast première of *The Two Character Play (Outcry)* to be produced in tandem with *The Glass Menagerie*. The successful public and critical reception of the plays led to a friendship between the two men and eventually in 1979 to Williams's designation of Leverich as his authorized biographer. The playwright reviewed preliminary drafts of the work before his death in 1983. The book has been ready for publication since 1989, but the Lady Maria St. Just, co-executor of the Williams estate, prevented it from appearing until after her death last year. The authoritarian Russian-born St. Just, unable to write the book herself, clearly sought a biographer she could control and a biography that would present her in what she saw as her dominant role in the playwright's life. She might ultimately have found a more experienced writer, but no one who could have produced a more faithful, thorough, sensitive, and carefully documented study.

With access to letters, diaries, journals, and family documents, Leverich sets the record straight on many counts. He finds that the infamous lobotomy was not performed on Rose in 1937 but in 1943, and that Tom's guilt about it served as the immediate impetus for his depiction of her in *The Glass Menagerie*. He examines Williams's closeness to his sister and his own fear of encroaching madness that pursued him throughout his life. He dismisses the dissolute picture of the playwright painted in later years by several of his self-serving companions, and shows that Williams was far from being the precocious homosexual he himself depicts in his *Memoirs*. With his strict Puritanical upbringing, he was late in developing sexually and even later in declaring his sexual preference. I remember how excited he was on his return from the University of Iowa at Christmas 1937, when he told me of the passionate physical affair he was having with a young woman there. I had never known him to speak with such passion about anyone. He expected that they would continue the affair, but, on his return, he found that she had rejected him for someone else. "I was thrown over by the beloved bitch," he later wrote in his journal, "but the experience was valuable." It was his first real sexual experience; he was twenty-six years old. His attraction to women continued, and for a long time he felt, as Leverich puts it, that most people were "ambiguous sexually and that he was in no sense stereotypical." It was very much later that he became exclusively homosexual.

Leverich stresses the importance of the two major formative influences on Williams's early development: Clark Mills, his poetic mentor who fostered his writing of poetry and who introduced him to the work of a wide range of writers, and Willard Holland, the talented and dynamic theater director, who, as head of the St. Louis Mummers, was responsible for the first important productions of his plays. As a man of the theater, Leverich is excellent in relating Williams's early efforts to the larger national theatrical scene. He is also astute in depicting the stifling provincial atmosphere of St. Louis in the early Thirties in which Williams struggled and from which he sought to escape. Leverich declares that as a biographer he "must forego or at least temper the fallibility" of the many candid interviews in which the dramatist dramatizes

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himself. "Tennessee was a fabricator—*that* was his profession," Leverich points out, and as such, every scene he describes is partly if not wholly an invention. He tells of the last meeting of our College Poetry Society when somebody brought a case of beer and "something like a riot occurred with one male member chasing one female member round and round a fifty-dollar 'vahse' which resulted finally in that ornament's complete demolition." A charming scene, but I was there, and the fact that it did not take place is of little consequence. There are other more important instances, fortunately not many, where Leverich is briefly misled by his subject's imaginative fabrications.

This book deals specifically with the making of *The Glass Menagerie*, but the character that is left out of the play, the father who has absconded, was perhaps more important than any other in the playwright's future development. Leverich writes that he has reached a conclusion

> forced by events documented in Tom's home life and in his writings that it was his "hated" father who *most* influenced him personally . . . I can think of nothing that injures more the developing manhood of a young boy, nothing that can be more intensely felt, than the unrequited love of a son for his father. And no mother's or sister's love can replace or compensate for that rupture. It was a loss that Tennessee felt to his dying day, a loss that he projected into the act of creation. The missing ideal of a son in the loving image of his father became instead the identity of the artist in revolt. It was why Tom chose the name Tennessee, deeply impressed as he was with the fighting spirit of his father's Tennessean forebears.

That spirit may be heard distinctly in "Kitchen Door Blues," a comic poem that Tom wrote around the time he was working on *The Glass Menagerie*. It may have been part of a projected Negro libretto or one of the blues songs he promised to write for Libby Holman. When late in his life I asked permission to reprint the poem in an anthology, Tom told me that of all his works it was the one his father, Cornelius, liked best. One can understand why; he must have felt that he himself was speaking:

> My old lady died
> of a common cold.
> She smoked cigars
> and was ninety years old.
>
> She was thin as paper
> with the ribs of a kite
> and she flew out the kitchen
> door one night!
>
> Now I'm no younger'n
> the old lady was
> when she lost gravitation
> and I smoke cigars.
>
> I look sort of peaked
> and I feel kind of pore,
> so for God's sake lock
> that kitchen door![2]

Here the frail little Southern lady immortalized in *The Glass Menagerie* as standing on her front porch ecstatic about jonquils and waiting for gentlemen callers is sent flying out of the back door, the kitchen door. These lines embody perfectly the absent drunken husband's revenge on the domineering little woman who had for so long ruled the roost. In his *Memoirs*, Tom describes his mother as marching into his hospital room, "a little Prussian officer in drag" (she was after all the great-granddaughter of German immigrants), and remarked that writers would do well to free themselves from the influence of their powerful mothers. In this poem, one finds the dark underside of *The Glass Menagerie*, and like all the dialogue of the plays, these lines come right off the page. It is the father's

2 From *In the Winter of Cities*, by Tennessee Williams. Copyright 1956 by Tennessee Williams. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

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voice that one hears, but it is also Tom's voice: I can hear him intoning it and following it up with a loud cackle and resounding laughter. It is a far cry indeed from the clear bell-like tones of the poetry of *The Glass Menagerie*, reminiscent as it is of the lucid lyrics of that other St. Louis poet, Sara Teasdale, whom Tom so admired when I first met him.

Tennessee Williams always felt ambivalent toward *The Glass Menagerie*, once scrawling on a typescript of it "a rather dull little play" too "nice" to represent the drama that he felt he could and should write. Late in his life he said, "It is the saddest play I have ever written. It is full of pain. It is painful for me to see it." Eddie Dowling, who produced it and played in it, was incensed when Audrey Wood gave Irene Mayer Selznick the rights to produce *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and wrote to a friend that Tennessee Williams "went off with this beautiful sister into Cheap Clap Trap Melodrama aided and abetted by Mr. Kazan. And the strange Audrey Wood. Poor Williams, who would have gone into immortality with Shelley, Keats, Bacon, Goldsmith, and Shaw if he could have kept out of the pig sty." Whether he would have been greater had he eschewed the melodramatic violence of his subsequent work, stemming as it did from his father's rough Tennessee forebears, it is hard to say. But it is clear that he was never again to write a drama couched in such lucid, lyrical prose, reflecting his poetic heritage of Sidney Lanier and so revealing of his youthful and vulnerable self.

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Letters

Dennett's dangerous idea, II

To the Editors:
Inspired or provoked by Paul R. Gross's vehement letter (February 1996) about Phillip E. Johnson's review of my book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (October 1995), I reread Mr. Johnson's review, which had not struck me as so heinous when I first read it. Allowing any reviewer the right to put a little spin on his summary, I have to say that I found almost nothing to object to in Mr. Johnson's account of my book and its main themes. Paul Gross is right to complain about Mr. Johnson's exaggeration of the purported weaknesses of evolutionary theory, and about his amusing misappropriation of Searle's distinction between brute facts and social facts. Evolution is no more a social fact than chemistry is; it is a brute fact, and when the residual controversies about details are eventually sorted out, some will turn out to be brute facts, and the others to be brute falsehoods. Social facts really have nothing to do with scientific theories.

The one thing I object to in Mr. Johnson's review is his fearmongering about my admonition to religious parents. I wrote:

> If you insist on teaching your children falsehoods—that the Earth is flat, that "Man" is not a product of evolution by natural selection—then you must expect, at the very least, that those of us who have freedom of speech will feel free to describe your teachings as the spreading of falsehoods, and will attempt to demonstrate this to your children at our earliest opportunity.

Mr. Johnson conjures up barbed wire and worse from my phrase "at the very least," but I expect he agrees with me all the same on the principle that lay behind it: if a falsehood is vile enough, we might indeed feel justified in taking more vigorous action. He leaves out the previous sentence in my book: "If you want to teach your children that they are the tools of God, you had better not teach them that they are God's rifles, or we will have to stand firmly opposed to you: your doctrine has no glory, no special rights, no intrinsic and inalienable merit." Where would *you* draw the line? If you found a sect that was teaching its children that women were born to be slaves, ought to be beaten and raped for the amusement of men, and should be denied literacy, would you not join me in saying to them that "at the very least, those of us who have freedom of speech will feel free to describe your teachings as the spreading of falsehoods"? Mightn't you take some more vigorous steps? Might you even attempt to liberate those children from their vicious (if devout) elders? If you answer "Heavens, no!" on grounds of religious freedom, I'll raise the ante, of course. Presumably there is *some* vicious nonsense that you would not want children to be brainwashed with, and would condone action to avert. I was not advocating, or threatening, "forced religious conversion," but acknowledging, in passing, that we all agree that there are limits to what passes in the name of religious freedom. My main warning was about a most undesirable tension that is being created by those who are skeptical on nonscientific grounds about evolution. My posi-

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tion is simply that evolution is fact (and neuroscience has shown that our minds are our brains—and hence are just as mortal as the rest of our material bodies), and that the only strong action we need take is to teach these facts, in all our schools, as soon as students are the appropriate age to understand them.

While the rest of the educated world looks on in amused disbelief, school boards in America, the leading scientific nation in the world, are wrestling with this curiously backward problem. It should have been firmly and quietly laid to rest in 1925, when John Scopes was tried and convicted in a Tennessee court for teaching evolution—a just verdict, given the prevailing law, but so ludicrous that although the creationists won the battle, they lost the war. Or so it seemed. They regrouped, only to suffer another defeat in 1981, in Arkansas. Now they are once again on the move, emboldened by recent swings in public opinion: criticism of science is in; criticism of religion is out.

Some religious leaders are tempted to take advantage of this climate and re-introduce "creation science" or its equally lame if less overtly religious successor, "intelligent design theory," to the biology curriculum as worthy rivals of standard evolutionary biology. Other religious leaders are rightly dubious of the credentials of these alternatives, but are reluctant to be seen siding with science "against religion." Both groups of religious leaders should think again. The consequences for their own peace of mind—and reputations—could be horrendous.

One of the undeniable benefits of the Information Age is that from now on, no political or religious power on earth can misinform its people for long. The cat is out of the bag, everywhere, on all topics. This surely makes forlorn the hope that the implications of evolution can be kept hidden a while longer in the mists of traditional doctrines. Modern evolutionary biology is good, secure science—on a par with physics and chemistry and geology, for instance. But it is also becoming one of the most exciting growth areas in science, of vital importance to everyone on the planet. Einstein's theory wasn't "just a theory," and it ushered in the Atomic Age. Darwin's theory isn't "just a theory" either, and when our children come to understand this, as they soon will no matter what desperate roadblocks their elders try to erect, they may not be very forgiving.

Deliberately misinforming a defenseless child is one of the least forgivable sins. Standing by while others do it is almost as shameful. The advocates of creationism are honorable, but deeply wrong. They are ruled by their hearts, not their minds, and perhaps we should excuse them on the grounds that given their upbringing they find the truth too strange and painful to endorse, but we should not acquiesce in their attempt to prolong the agony by imposing their delusion on others. Today, anyone who believes that evolution by natural selection is an unproven theory really ought to know better. Controversy still swirls around the details, but the basic outlines of the theory are as solid as Gibraltar.

We need not, and should not, go out of our way to confront students with the way these facts may conflict with various religious beliefs, but if the question gets raised, I think that there is only one defensible policy: the issue should be discussed, calmly and openly, and without misrepresentation. These facts do indeed conflict sharply with theism, in most but not all of its forms, and with a variety of other traditional religious doctrines, and I agree with Johnson that scientists should not mislead people about that (as they sometimes have done).

History provides a useful perspective. The Catholic Church, after centuries of embarrassment and denial, has finally conceded that it overstepped its authority in its fearful attack on Galileo, and see how misguided its fears were! Every schoolchild today accepts without tears or terror that the Earth is not the center of the universe. In due course, our children will learn as calmly about the amazing process that has unfolded, without miraculous intervention, over the last four billion years on this planet. It is one of the truly dazzling stories of science, a giant step forward for human understanding. We need not, and should not, discard our heritage, however; the ancient creation myths can be transmitted to new generations as the beautiful and ingenious stories they were, but we must also frankly admit that they are as irredeemably false as the quaint physics and astronomy of those pioneer days of several millennia ago.

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On September 2, 1967, the people of Sweden took a big step: in a single day, they stopped driving on the left, and changed over to driving on the right. It was an unnerving and potentially dangerous shift, but it worked beautifully, with very few accidents, since the Swedes all worked together and agreed that there would be no exemptions, no privileged precincts where the old ways would be allowed to persist. And when the brief ordeal was over, all the fine places in Sweden were as accessible as they ever had been; everything was transformed, and everything was still the same. Some things should not be done gradually. It is high time for Americans to join hands and firmly acknowledge evolution, from sea to shining sea. The world will be just as wonderful the next day, and our children can get on with their quest for further understanding, spared the upsetting burden of a controversy that ought to be as extinct as the dinosaurs.

Daniel C. Dennett, Director
Center for Cognitive Studies
Tufts University

Phillip E. Johnson replies:

I could reply to Mr. Dennett on several points, but would rather stick to the most important one.

In 1981, faced with a legal controversy over whether creation should be taught alongside evolution in the public schools, the Council of the National Academy of Sciences officially resolved that "religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief." The purpose of this declaration was to assure the public that theistic religion has nothing to fear from science, but of course this is nonsense. Contemporary science aims to comprehend all of reality, and the leading scientists write and talk constantly about God, usually to promote a naturalistic or materialistic worldview.

What I particularly liked about Mr. Dennett's book is that it frankly acknowledges that contemporary Darwinism implies a philosophical agenda that goes far beyond the paltry data that Darwinists invoke to prove their theory: cyclical variations within fundamentally stable populations, greater and lesser degrees of biochemical similarity, and so on. When the science educators assure the public that what they mean to teach as "evolution" does not threaten "religion," they are of course lying, and, as Mr. Dennett says, deliberately misinforming children (especially about God) is "one of the least forgivable sins." To his credit, Mr. Dennett does not lie. He straightforwardly proposes using public education to promote scientific materialism as fact. That is what the educators are already doing, although more often by persistent insinuation than by candid declaration, and I do not think they will thank Mr. Dennett for helping to bring this campaign out into the open.

It is not the theists but the scientific materialists who ought to fear the Information Age, which makes it impossible to shut out unwelcome ideas. The Darwinian claim that random mutations and natural selection can produce prodigies of biological complexity is an outdated piece of nineteenth-century science that has survived almost to the end of the twentieth century only because it is the best that materialism can do. I salute Daniel Dennett for his courage in going to war on the back of such an aged charger, and invite him to gather his forces to meet me and my colleagues on fair terms in some appropriate university forum. There we will find out in good time who owns the intellectual high ground, and who finds the truth too strange and painful to endorse.

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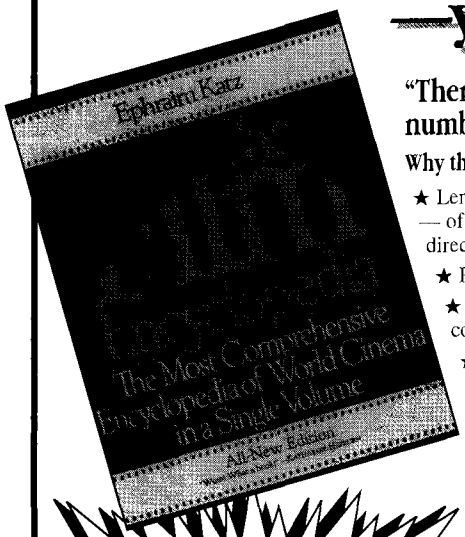

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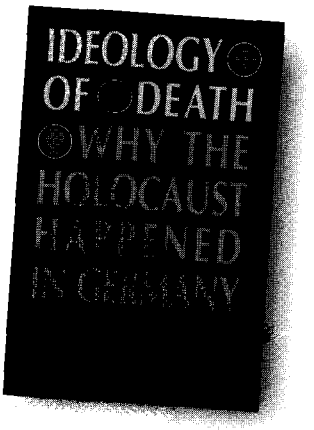

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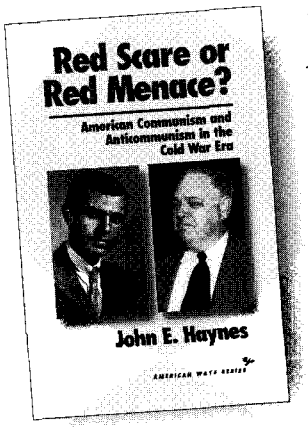

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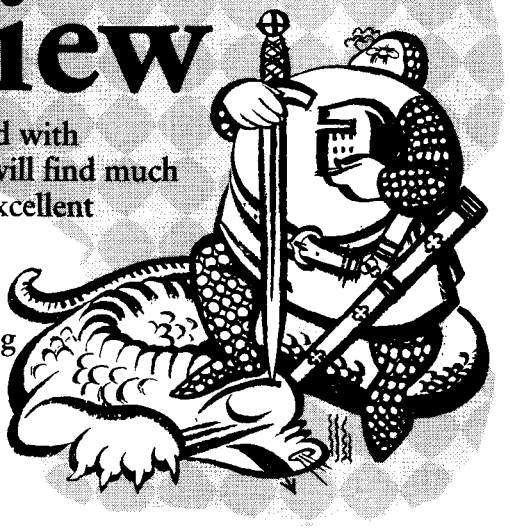

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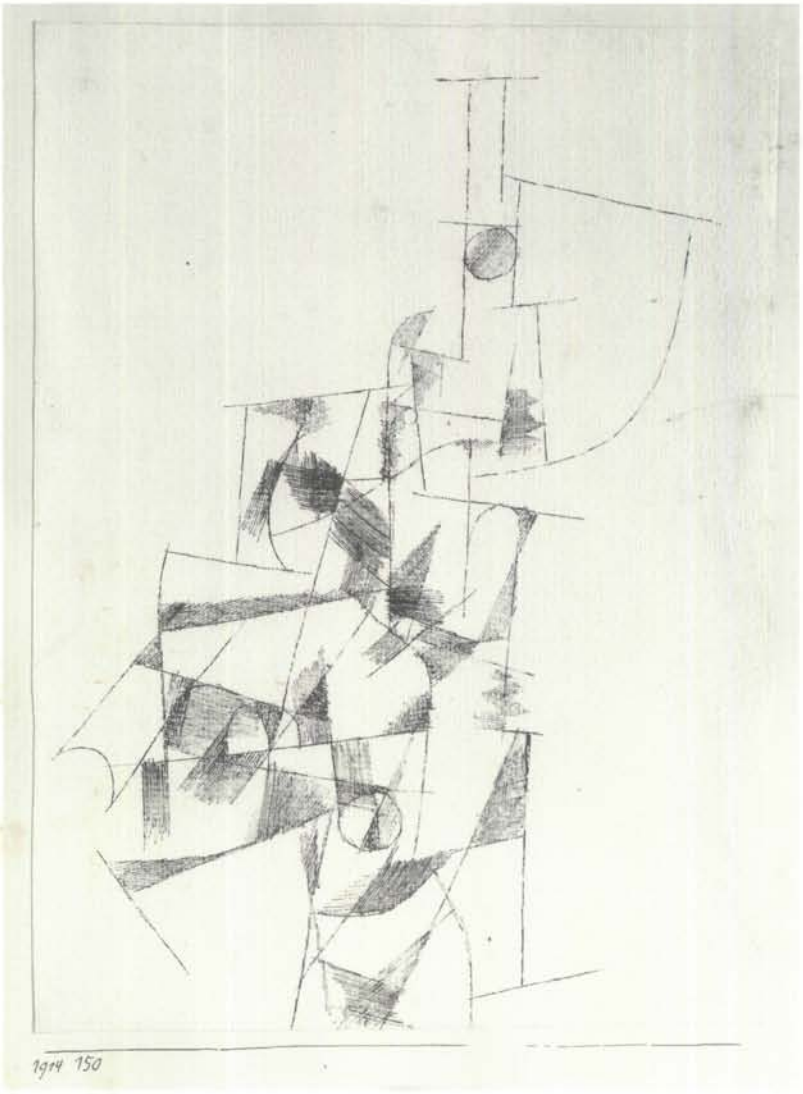

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